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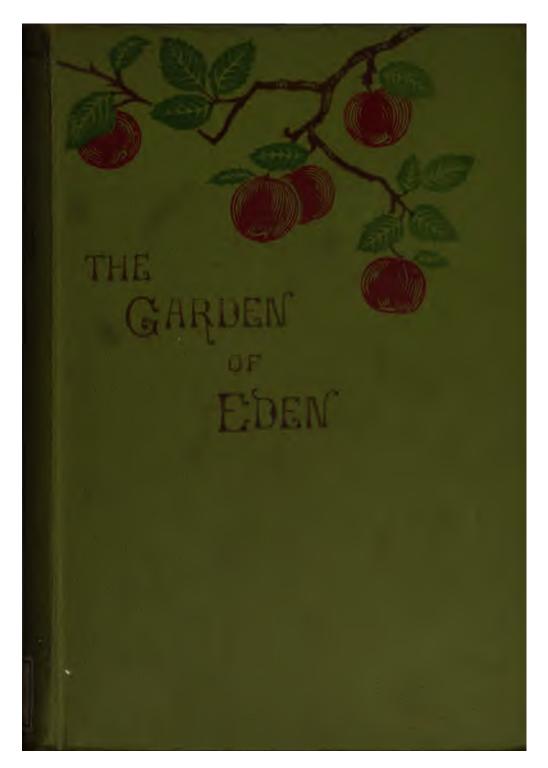
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THE GARDEN OF EDEN.

A Movel.

"For all our workes a recompense is sure;
'Tis sweet to think on what 'twas hard t' endure."

Herrick.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.





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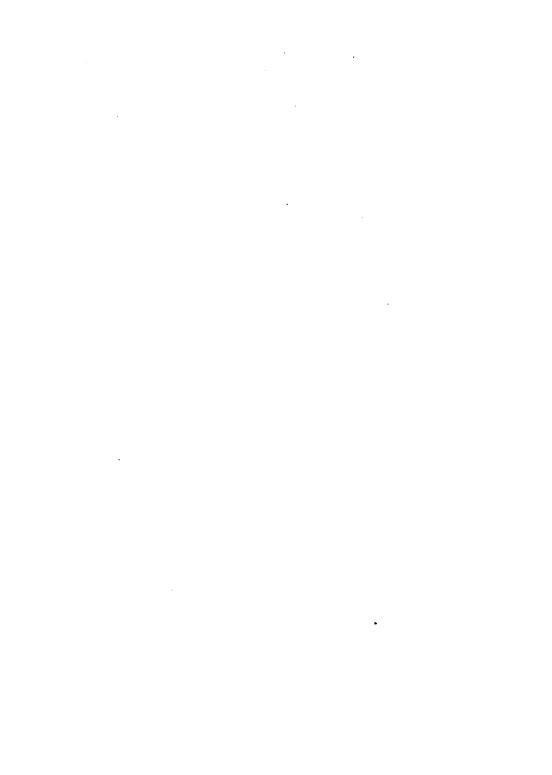
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PROLOGUE. IN THE GARDEN.

VOL. I.



THE GARDEN OF EDEN.

CHAPTER I.

FIRST LOVE.

SULTRY noon in mid summer. The sun glowering fiercely upon an old-fashioned English garden—a garden at the back of a white house in a country village. A straight gravel path divides beds of flowers and fruit, whose perfumes rise and mingle with the hot air. Cowering beds of blossom, tall, slender young fruit-trees, great sturdy pear and apple trees, moist masses of vegetables modestly existing in the background, massive moss-roses lavishly distributing their passionate odour—there is a confusion of beauty rising to meet the rays

of the ruler of mundane heaven. Perfume, colour, form—all are here. The birds chirp drowsily in this bewildering atmosphere, and the laden bees stagger heavily along, sometimes tumbling, drunken with flower-flavours, among the very blooms that have intoxicated them.

Beyond the square beds of vegetation, the path is bounded by creeping treespear and apple. These seem cooler and more collected, their hour having not yet come; and to the left of the path they ornament there is a flower garden, a "pleasaunce," a lawn dotted with bright flower-beds, and flanked by elms and yews. Here, in the shade, is a half tent, half shed, which suggests backwoods and colonial life, with its slowly swinging ham-Fair arms lie languidly along the canvas sides, a sweet round face, with large, inquiring eyes, lies upon the pillows. Althea's waving brown hair is tossed about, as she reclines there in a loose white gown just tied carelessly about the waist with a broad cashmere scarf. There is a nymph-like look about her, a suspicion of something strange and unconventional. And she is singing softly to herself some weird impromptu melody, a sort of human natural song, as her eyes are fixed upon the sky with that wondering, searching expression of hers.

Footsteps crackle on the gravel path that winds round the little lawn, and a tall, somewhat ungainly young man comes along, his hands in the pockets of his grey suit, his felt hat tilted over his blinking He has a sunburnt, good-humoured face; there is something sympathetic in his quaint, ill-formed features, and in those blinking blue eyes. Althea's old playmate, he is now her adorer. He is twenty-two, she is eighteen, but he owes the fact of his little pearl ring being on that fair hand, which hangs over the side of the hammock like some drooping flower, more to Althea's determined will than to his own powers. Honest, rough, earnest young Jack is not gifted. He has been Althea's slave, like some faithful dog, since they were babies together. His ideas are mostly reflections of hers. He worshipped her openly, but fearfully, timidly, till she made him "speak out."

"I shall never be able to do without you, Jack," she had said one day with the greatest composure; "so I suppose some day we shall have to be married. You see I couldn't have you always with me otherwise. You are not my brother, though I like you just as well as if you were; and I don't suppose a husband would like another man hanging about the house. Besides, I must have a husband some day, or I shall never be able to leave Elfield—and who else is there to marry me but you?"

Jack was so accustomed to Althea's strange ways of putting things, that he was scarcely more "staggered" than usual, although a strange, shy, overwhelmed feeling sent the blood to his brown face. He agreed with Althea that there was no one

to marry her except himself. At least, Old Sir Robert had no sons. not then. Mr. Black, the vicar, was married. mild little curate, who lived at the Mill, and taught Thea classics and mathematics, was her great butt. Having, through her handsome old father—the one doctor of that part of the county—the entrée to the best society, Thea "did not visit" the farmers, although some of their daughters had been educated abroad, and could speak the modern languages which she could only Jack was the one son of Sir read. Robert's agent and land-steward, who was a connection of the great family; and Thea was right when she proclaimed him "the only suitor she was likely to have."

"But, my dear boy, Althea will never marry you," his father had said, when Jack, after wandering about for days half suffocated with this terrible load upon his mind, stammered out some incoherent hints to his father.

- "Oh yes, she will," he had declared; relieved that the first objection had no stamina.
 - "Have you asked her?"
- "Well,—I don't exactly say that" (Jack was always truthful); "but we talked it over."
- "H'm!" The land-steward glanced curiously at his son, as he stroked his long black beard. "Well,—before I can say anything I must speak to the doctor."
- "Oh no,—pray not, father; Althea is going to do that herself."
- "Oh!" The "oh" meant volumes. The steward had always admired Althea, as a euriosity in human nature, a beautiful, elever, but spoiled and eccentric girl; but as a wife for Jack—it was preposterous!
- "Let us leave it alone; the matter will cure itself," said the doctor, when, later on, the two men discussed Althea's latest folly over their wine one day after dinner. Neither of them imputed the idea to Jack. The doctor roared over the "children's love-

making," as a famous joke. "It won't do them any harm," he said.

"It mayn't your girl; but Jack has a heart, though he is a bit of a fool," replied his father, who had a tender feeling stowed away in a corner of his heart for his motherless boy, and was nettled at his being laughed at. However, he agreed the best course to take was to treat the affair as a joke, and laugh them out of it by degrees.

But Althea was terribly in earnest, as she always was about everything. She had undertaken to marry Jack, and she intended to carry her intention through. She meant to "see the world," and Jack was to be her protector. When the time came the money would come. They must each have an allowance—their parents could afford it—then they would travel, hear, see, and enjoy foreign countries, and afterwards return and "settle down;" Jack in partnership with his father.

She mapped out the future with clear

decision, and by degrees poor Jack's oppression at his new honours gave way before these really delightful prospects, "although," he added uncomfortably, "I don't feel as if I could ever take care of you, Thea, or advise you. You know you are so much cleverer than I am."

"That is just as it should be," said Thea contentedly; "I should hate being dictated to. A clever man and I should fight, and think what a scandal that would make, let alone the discomfort of it! Oh, no; you will do very nicely for me, Jack, and we shall be just as happy as we have always been. But you must give me a ring, you know. Have you any money?"

In reply to this business-like demand, Jack had turned out his pockets—a half-sovereign, loose silver, and some halfpence. That sum would not buy a ring. He had two half-crowns on his bedroom mantelpiece, some coppers in his collar-drawer, "and," he added, with a sudden inspiration, "there's old Wood" (a farmer) "owes

me six shillings for bantams' eggs. Now, let us count up and see what that will make."

Jotting down the various sums with a pencil on the back of an envelope, the sum total of twenty-nine shillings and eight-pence halfpenny was obtained.

"I saw a pretty little pearl ring last market-day at Belford, marked thirty shillings," he said. "Only, Thea, that's not good enough for you. You ought to have diamonds. Oh, do let me speak to the governor."

"You will do nothing of the sort," was Thea's reply, laying her white hand decidedly upon Jack's brown, warty fist. "If I wanted diamonds, I have got some money in the savings-bank that would buy them. A man ought to buy his wife's engaged ring out of his own pocket-money, and if he hasn't much, like you, he ought to go without something, and feel the going without, for her sake. Do you understand? I will have the pearl ring, you only want

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threepence halfpenny of the thirty shillings."

She was thrusting her right hand into her pocket.

"You needn't do that, Thea"—the simple young fellow blushed violently, he had a dignity of his own, which was hurt—"I can manage quite well;" and the very same afternoon he rode over to Belford, and returned triumphant and excited, the pearl ring lying close and safe in wool in the little square white box in his pocket.

Althea took the presentation of the ring, and his placing it on her slender finger, coolly, as a matter of course. To do her justice, she was utterly ignorant of the huge, smouldering fire she was kindling in a rugged, late-developing nature. A strange, sharp feeling shot through Jack when he slid the slight pearly circlet over that delicate finger, with the pink filbert nail,—nor could his weak blue eyes glance at it without a choking sensation in his throat, and a queer feeling of giddiness in the

head, for weeks afterwards. One day, he suddenly stooped down and kissed it.

"You shouldn't do that, Jack," said Thea, frowning; "it is silly."

Her words were a stab. There had always been utter confidence between the two in their fraternal intercourse. Since the engagement, Thea had been just the same, frank, unblushing, sisterly. It was Jack whose heart beat more strongly when they met; who felt embarrassed sometimes, afraid to meet her straight, inquiring gaze; whose vague wonder it was when they would cease this matter-of-fact, ordinary manner to each other, and begin to behave like lovers. He saw the village folk "courting," as they strolled in the fields after church on Sunday evenings. seen but a few days ago a girl sitting on a stile; her "young man" was leaning against a tree close by, staring at her with a boorish, infatuated look,—and she, her comely head dark against the glowing sunset, was still as a statue; but there was a

rapt, shy, glorified expression on her blushing face with the downcast eyes and smiling lips, that smote sharp and direct to Jack's heart, which made him think of Althea with so sudden a pang of mingled pain, longing, and fear, that after he had sprung the stile, touching his cap to the specimen of womanhood who had so strangely moved him, he altered his course, and turning into a shady lane leading from the fields, threw himself upon a grassy bank for a pause of thought.

What was this? What was the matter with him?

The mental reply came, swift and cruel as the cut of a razor-blade. "That is how girls look when they are in love," he thought. If Thea, his queen-goddess, were to look at him like that, "I should—I think I should go mad," was his conclusion. "But, of course, it is impossible. She is so far above me. She will always look down upon me. She shall not," was the vague passionate outcry of the

uprising nature. "I will do - something, I don't care what,—but I won't stay here vegetating and playing the Before I marry her she shall fool. have cause to respect, if she cannot love me——" And then he broke down and sobbed. Had the world been his to dispose of, he would have bartered it without a second thought for one such look from Thea as that he had seen upon the simple face of the ignorant village wench; but inwardly he felt, knew, tasted the truth that, whatever he might do, whatever position he might eventually grasp, that lovely look could never be his.

"Her respect," he sadly thought, in his moody meditations on his one theme, "that, at least, I can win. Oh, why did she ever take it into her head to make me feel like this? I should have gone on in my fool's paradise, satisfied to be with her, as I have always been, if she had not begun it."

But no such troublesome reflections oc-

curred to Thea. She was getting annoyed though, by Jack's dull, moody manner since his awakening at the stile. And today, as he walked slowly towards her along the sunny garden-path, she felt impatient at the thought of another dull hour spent in fruitless attempts to rouse and inspirit him; and she called out, as she slowly swung in her hammock, "Jack, I don't wonder now you have been so stupid lately, if you stand about in the sun like that. You have had a lot of little sunstrokes, that is what's the matter with Come into the shade, do." vou.

Jack did as he was told. Thea looked enchantingly lovely as she lay there, her delicate face flushed with the heat. But somehow her beauty did not "knock him over there and then," as he acknowledged to himself it generally did. Between him and her potent influence rose the barrier of the first resolve of an unknown inner strength.

"I have had a lot of little strokes," he

acknowledged, meaningly, leaning against the post, which shook as the hammock swung; "but not from the sun you mean, Thea."

"Here's good old Jack talking poetry. The world turned topsy-turvy."

"I came here to-day, Thea, determined to tell you the truth."

"I thought you always told the truth, Jack." She was lazily closing her eyes, and looking at the "troublesome boy," as she called him, through her lashes.

"I always have tried to, Thea," he said, stretching himself, and clasping his hands convulsively behind him in the effort to steady himself, "and I think it would be wrong to you to go on having thoughts without telling you; now, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, of course. Go on. Talk away. I thought there was something on your mind. You have been a perfect nuisance to me these last few days. If you have any complaints to make, out with them!"

"I have only one, Thea," said Jack,

paling; "and that is that you are so beautiful, and so clever, and so lofty, that I am not good enough for you. You know it as well as I do, so you look down upon me. I know very well what I am-ugly, awkward, stupid; but, Thea, I love you with such a great, strong love that it balances all your beauty and cleverness. Ay" (and the young fellow's blue eves shone in his pale face as his passion grew), "and were they weighed, your gifts would fly up in the balance against the weight of a feeling you can never know-because you will never find a man worthy of the worship I feel for you. Thea, you will know how dearly I love you when I tell you that I will never marry you till you can say, 'Jack, you are my equal.'"

"Jack, you are mad!" cried Thea. She had sprung up, and had poised herself on her elbow. "What on earth are you talking about? How can a girl be a man's equal? They are different; but it is of no use talking to you. Some one has been

putting rubbishy ideas into your head, and the sooner you get rid of them the better." She jumped out of the hammock, stretched her slim, tall figure, and shook out the limp folds of her dress in an attempt at nonchalance. Yet not only was she as astonished as Balaam must have been when his ass turned and spake, but her nature responded to and respected intense feeling-the passion which was her normal state, woven in with her nature. Thea's attitude in her surroundings was one of contemptuous indifference. She could no more understand the eating, sleeping content of her fellow creatures than they could suspect the wild impulses and subtle thoughts which went in and out of that strange young being like bees in a hive, making a store of unknown honey that oppressed, while the sensation of its presence puzzled the young girl still in her chrysalis, unconscious state. "Jack," she said, holding out her hands, and looking at him, with her large brown eyes

glistening with tears 'don't talk any more nonsense. I love you; and, oh! I do trust you so after what you have said;" and the soft sweet lips were held up, and Jack, in the seventh heaven for one short minute of life, not only took his first kiss, but had Thea's fair head on his broad shoulder, which quivered and shook underthe tender burden in his excess of bliss.

Where were his heroics now? Never had he felt more abjectly slavish, more pitiably at her mercy. The look on the face of the village girl had become as a burst bubble before that grand, exalting demonstration, which had somehow transfigured him. Abashed, ashamed of his own ideas, he felt like the favourite of some great goddess, who in the sunlight of her favours had been so base as to dream of the things of earth.

"Now, for goodness' sake, let us have a little peace," said Thea, smiling through her tears. "If you have made any horrible plans of going away from Elfield, or anything of that sort, don't give me the benefit of them to-day. It is too hot."

'Jack guiltily disclaimed any such treasonable ideas, which had in reality merely hung about his mind in a vague, misty way; and the lovers strolled from the pleasaunce into the garden proper, Thea clinging to Jack's arm, her soft cheek resting against his rough coat in a luxurious confidence, just as her restless, impetuous nature was poised in the comforting sense of his strong, protecting love.

"I feel happy," she said, with surprise, raising her head. "Isn't it strange? I am sure you haven't said anything to make one cheerful."

"And I don't," he said, with a huge sigh. "I seem to have been lifted out of myself, somehow, and to have come down to earth with an ugly tumble. Such feelings can't last, Thea, and they make you feel bad afterwards, as if something dreadful was coming."

"Do let us leave off talking like people

in a book, and be ourselves," said Thea. "There—do you feel the wind getting up?" (They were close to the wooden garden paling, and a light breeze rustled through the fruit trees and stirred Thea's loose hair.) "Of course nothing lasts. Look at those white clouds. They mean rain to-morrow, and an end to this hot, dry calm. Here, let's see if there are any greengages fit to eat."

In a moment Thea had hoisted herself into the old greengage-tree, with its sturdy trunk and big, forked branches. Here, year after year, she and Jack had gathered the fragrant fruit, first choosing those cloven by the beaks of those accomplished fruit-tasters, the birds. Now Jack carefully chose one here, another there, looking askance at Thea as he tossed them into her lap. What did she look like? Something divine! he thought, as his eyes travelled over her modelled girlish form—around which the thin summer garments were somewhat lightly twisted—and rested upon the large-

eyed, serious face, shadowed by the thick toliage—and the floating fair hair, golden against the background of blue sky.

"What's that?" said Thea, suddenly, rearing her head.

"Footsteps," said Jack, after they had listened a moment. "And coming this way too. Don't you think you had better get down?"

"Not I." Then Thea bent down and peeped. She could just get a glimpse here and there of the broad garden path. "I see two pairs of legs," she said, in a low tone; "one set belong to papa, safe enough; but the other? They are old, such funny old feet—gaiters—step up and down about an inch from the ground—who on earth can it be?"

Jack stooped down, and then shrank back. "Oh, Thea, it is Sir Robert!" he cried, in dismay. "And you here—not dressed, as you ought to be, you know, to see Sir Robert. What shall we do?"

They were in a corner, a positive cul-

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de-sac. Ignominious flight might be made across beds, through the cabbages, and under cover of the fruit-trees, and this was the course Jack would have counselled had he dared to advise his sovereign love. But she thought otherwise.

"I shall stop where I am," she said, swinging her little foot, and throwing her arm round a branch. "If he comes, let him come. I don't care. I have more right to be sitting in one of my own trees than Sir Robert has to come prying about in other people's gardens, haven't I?"

The fact was incontrovertible; still, as the footsteps neared and the voices grew louder, Jack felt very uncomfortable. The climax of his discomfort was reached when the two gentlemen, after pausing a moment, came along the side path, and the two young people were discovered, the doctor exclaiming, in a tone of annoyance, "Thea, my dear child! whatever are you doing up there? Come down; this is Sir Robert."

"Don't you think Sir Robert would prefer to come up here?" Thea bent down from her perch with unblushing coolness. "There is quite a nice breeze. Good-morning, Sir Robert. I will come down if you like, of course."

"By no means," said the old baronet, in a courtly way, with a low bow. "The charming sight of so fair a young lady in a tree—quite a picture for a painter would repay a far longer walk than I have taken in your pleasant garden. Let me beg of you not to disturb yourself."

Thea swung herself down, and was face to face with her father—a tall, fine old man, whose sixty odd years had failed to weigh upon his broad shoulders, or to bend a Jupiter-like head, though they had brushed it lightly with silver—and with the "great man" of the neighbourhood, Sir Robert Manners, who had but just arrived at the old Hall to pass the first sultry weeks of the recess among the leafy shades of Elfield Park.

The baronet was getting an old man; his short figure shook ever so slightly as he leant on a thick gold-headed stick, and the diamond in his broad shirt-frill gleamed as he trembled, like some living light-spot. He had been handsome in his day, with a Stuart beauty, inherited from the founder of the Manners family; and there was still a lingering comeliness about the furrowed face and the deep blue eyes, like the last faint red gleams of sunset upon a darkening landscape. There was yet another charm the long years had failed to dissolve, which \mathbf{held} Sir Robert favourite—a charm more potent than the fragmentary traces of bygone beauty—and this was an old-world courtliness, an atmosphere of the sentiment, place aux dames, which was in reality the outcome of a generous chivalry which sought and reverenced the good in, and ignored the deficiencies of, the human object of attention. the doctor's garden, those deep blue eyes of his shunned the cabbages and instinctively

dwelt upon the roses; and as Thea stood before him, with her roughened elf-locks loose upon a careless dress which might have been anything between a classical toga-pallium and a beggar's makeshift wrap—he merely saw that her delicate, strange, girlish beauty had a fitting frame in this loose white garment.

"I have not seen you, although I may add I have frequently heard of you, for a long time, Miss Althea. Allow me to congratulate you upon your growth—upon your development. And my good friend, your father, informs me that this is not only personal—that while Dame Nature has been busy painting roses on those fair cheeks, and varnishing those glistening eyes, extraordinary changes and surprises are in store for us. I hear that you sing, Miss Althea."

"Everybody sings," said Althea, tossing away her tumbling intrusive hair. "There is nothing in that. I have never been taught."

"Except by the instructor of those natural warblers, the birds," said Sir Robert, "Nature. And what can be sweeter or lovelier than those heavenly carols? Wild roses, birds—these are Nature's jewels, with which she tempts us to her fair bosom. You will sing to me, my dear child, will you not? Excuse my familiarity, but you know we are old friends."

The white, withered, ringed hand was held out, and clasped by Thea, whose nature leapt up and prostrated itself before sympathy, no matter in what shape or form it presented itself.

"I only wish I could do anything worth hearing," she said. "And as for the birds, God has not given us their inspired language, Sir Robert. We women have to stammer out the thoughts of others as best we may. It is hard, is it not, to feel one's self inferior to creatures who, as they say, have no souls?"

The doctor, unwilling that Althea should

be led into exposing one of her "strange hobbies," as he called them, interrupted. "Thea will like to sing, and I want you to hear her, Sir Robert," he said. "Let us go in out of the sun. Will you come?" he added to Jack, with a peculiar intonation, which made the young fellow inwardly rage and outwardly blush, and glancing at his watch, mutter an excuse.

Then he stood and watched the three retreating slowly to the house—Althea accommodating her bounding gait to the slow paces of the baronet, over whose whitened head she towered by several inches; the doctor, a giant in comparison with the two, walking beside; and he, Jack—forsaken, ignored, left utterly in the background alone. With a frown and a savage word he turned into the field, sprung the hedge, and went home across country. While Althea, absorbed in the sympathy of the moment, which had struck a sensitive point in her nature, as a hand might touch an instrument, was listening

eagerly to Sir Robert, utterly oblivious of her lover.

They passed through the stable-yardwhere the yard-dog, sleeping in the sun before the vine-covered stable-front, opened one eye and lazily wagged his tail-and entered the house through the "front garden," which was ablaze with flowers, and where canaries were singing in their brass cages among the climbing roses and clematis on the cottage walls. For Althea's home was but a white cottage, with a low, picturesque roof, although Dr. Biron had rendered it nondescript by putting in bay windows, building out a drawing-room, and adding rooms here and there at the back as he required them. He would have enlarged the "front garden," but this was impossible, as it opened upon the road leading to the village street; so it remained what it was, an English cottage garden, in spite of the bit of smooth green lawn studded with flower-stands, rose-bushes, and rustic garden-chairs.

Althea pushed aside the green Venetian blind at the open window, and stepping into the cool darkened little "drawing-room," opened her piano, as her mother walked quietly in, followed by the two gentlemen.

Mrs.Biron was a staid, gentle womana little incomprehensible, some people said. It was difficult to talk to her, even when you were inclined to like her for her smooth pleasant face, with the grey curls arranged under her white cap, for she had a way of replying by a glance of the eyes, which were so curiously like her daughter's, or by a half-doubtful smile of assent, which was not conducive to con-But people who not only versation. observed, but reasoned upon their observations, thought that a life-story lay hidden below the calm unruffled surface and the apparent apathy of manner.

Sir Robert looked round him with an approving air, as he carefully lowered himself into a chair by the aid of the doctor's

"I always like these rooms of yours so much, Mrs. Biron," he said, putting up his eyeglass and glancing round, first at the pictures-mostly strange old oil-paintings which crowded the walls from floor to ceiling—then at the old-fashioned chairs, not two alike; at the quaint China monsters presented to the doctor by captains of East Indiamen, who had sought his advice before taking their vessels up-river; and at the carved Indian table, with the great China bowl of dried rose-leaves, whose admixture with certain sweet spices was Mrs. Biron's speciality. "As for your 'potpourri," went on Sir Robert, "I always tell Lady Manners hers cannot approach it." Upon which a faint smile flickered on the face of the doctor's wife; Dr. Biron said, "Remember to send Lady Manners some, my dear," and Althea struck a few chords on the old grand piano, which made Sir Robert turn towards her. There was an impatience, a promise of power, in the clear sharp tones, as in some young racer's

restless pawing, with veins swelling and nostrils quivering, before the start.

"What will you have—an air of Handel, or an old song? Or one of the things I made up myself? I told you I had never learnt properly, you know, Sir Robert."

Sir Robert, who in the season had nightly witnessed the operatic triumphs of Pasta, Grisi, Malibran, Schroeder-Devrient, and the rest—and who, in spite of his best intentions, could not stifle his doubts as to the musical powers of this cottage-flower, this untaught country-girl—chose an "old ballad."

"Nothing is more charming to me than national sentiment, general and particular," he assured Althea; "and embodied as you will not fail to embody it, it will—must, prove a treat."

Upon which Thea frowned. Clearsighted, she detected the doubt, but she was only nerved to supreme effort. Her mind had understood Sir Robert, just as her clear eyes had focussed the chivalrous, kindly old man. She well knew his proclivities. Had she not spent hours in the old Elizabethan mansion—when it was forsaken by all but the housekeeper and the servants—reading the family history, the family passion, upon the walls? Who had worshipped more devotedly at the Stuart shrine than she? Who had more faithfully read "martyr" in the expression of sublime patience upon the wistful face of King Charles, seated upon the snowy charger? who had more earnestly striven to interpret the dark troubled countenance of his successor? Althea was by snatches a Jacobite, as she was "everything by turns;" and this was the moment of the reaping: the seed had been sown in the silence of Elfield Hall in a mental soil which could produce "all things for all men."

Sir Robert, awaiting Thea's performance with ready patience and dimmed eyes, was suddenly aroused, quickened into attention—as some old war-charger might be stirred by the clarion "To arms!"—by

the song, whose words lay buried in his heart—

"Charlie is my darling, my darling, my darling! Charlie is my darling, my own Chevalier."

He stared, electrified, as the passionate notes were launched out, the eyeglass fell from his trembling hand, his old head drooped upon his breast. He seemed suddenly lifted out of himself into a strange scene. A picture stood out to his imagination clear, vivid. Rows of men, in Royalist uniforms, with uplifted faces, eyes shining with enthusiasm, bare-headed, waving hats and swords, shouting, while drums beat and joy-bells clanged. In their midst a knot of cavaliers, the wind stirring their long curls and the streaming feathers of the hats held aloft in their jewelled gloves, and, as centre of the rich crowd, amid the glowing colours of court uniform, the glittering of armour, and the gleaming of naked swords—the still, slim figure of the young prince, his head slightly bent, his

Stuart face pale with emotion, his hand trembling as it rested loosely on his sword-hilt. "My own Chevalier!" cried the old man, joining his quavering voice to Thea's stirring cry, and waving his hand as if he too held hat and plume in the presence of his royal kinsman. Then he sank back, recalled to himself and abashed; and as Thea ended her song, two heavy tears fell upon his weak old knees.

"Excuse me, Biron," he said in a shaking voice, deprecatingly stretching out his hand for the doctor's support as he staggered to his feet and made a step towards the piano. "It was such a surprise, such a great surprise. You made me see it all, my young friend. The people with their love written on their faces, their great love for the young king—God bless him!" (and instinctively he raised his hand to remove his hat.) "Biron, I am a bit beside myself, I think. I am getting very old, very old. I forgot I was in the drawing-room, in the presence of the ladies" (and he bowed

towards them). "I thought—would you believe it?—that I had my hat on. Ah, Miss Althea! Charles Edward is not dead—his memory is alive when you sing—it is like a reproach to me that I do not think of the past, glorious old times, more. But I will, I will. The first moment I come home I will have the portrait—ah, you know it, Miss Althea!—taken out of the picture gallery and hung in the great hall where all the world shall see it, where it will meet their eyes coming in and going out, ay, that I will!" and he struck his stick on the floor.

"Let her sing you something else," suggested the doctor, his head held high with pride in his child's success. "Thea, some cheerful little thing,—'Come lads and lasses,' or your little Spanish song."

"Not for worlds, my good friend, not for worlds. You have taught me a lesson, my dear young lady, and I thank you for it, while I congratulate you on your genius. It seems to me that we eat, drink, sleep,

and are merry over and above in these days; that while our ancestors loved and clung to a cause, ay, and did not shrink from watering it with their blood, we let them moulder away in forgotten graves, nor give a passing thought to that for which they died. It should not be. I, for one, shall not forget to-day; but I will hear no more after that, now. You will sing to me again? Biron, we have a dinner-party to-morrow,-my cousins, Lord and Lady Belmont, and their nephew and heir, Mr. Clifford, will arrive for a short visit. Will you all come? Lady Manners shall call and make the request on her own account."

The doctor assured him this was unnecessary.

"Lady Manners will have much pleasure in calling upon Mrs. Biron this afternoon," repeated the old gentleman. "But I must return to the Hall, Biron. It takes me longer to travel the little distance between our dwellings than it used to do. But

where is Miss Althea, that I may make my adieux?"

Althea had flown to a corner of the garden where there was a choice tuft of Scottish heather, had gathered a spray, run into the dining-room, pounced upon her work-basket, and torn off a bit of Stuart plaid ribbon that tied a needle-case. This she arranged in a knot around the heather, and presented to Sir Robert.

"Believe me, I appreciate the delicate compliment," he said, raising her hand gallantly to his lips, "and if keeping this till I die will not be keeping your little bouquet very long, my child, Time is to blame, not my good will. Adieu for the present, Miss Althea; adieu, madam;" and he went away and across the lawn to the little garden gate under the trees talking confidentially of Althea's "great gifts," as he leant on her father's arm.

"You ought to have heard her sing something else, Sir Robert. You have no idea...."

"My dear friend, I have heard all these singers. They warble, they toss out great notes, they do the most wonderful things—but they don't often make you feel, they don't take possession of your emotions and work upon them as they please. Believe me, this child of yours is a genius. She belongs to the world at large, and you will find that in spite of you, the world will get at her and claim her."

"Well, I have no objection," said the doctor. "I don't want the child to bury herself in Elfield all her days, hiding her light under a bushel."

"We will talk it over with my cousin Belmont," said the old man. "He is quite music mad, and his nephew Clifford is not much better. Good-bye—we shall see you to-morrow;" and he went off, tremulous with the reaction of a sharp emotion.

"What did he say?" cried Thea, meeting her father, "is it not delightful? How strange it is these wonderful things happen so suddenly! Why, only an hour ago I

was thinking perhaps I was doomed to be buried in Elfield all my life—and to-morrow, actually to-morrow, I shall go into the world."

"Rather a small world—half a dozen people. Quite enough, though, for a child like you. Where's your mother?"

Althea flew off upstairs, and found Mrs. Biron in her own little bed-chamber, with the sloping ceiling and the white hangings, —opening and shutting the wardrobe drawers, out of which came faint odours of lavender and rosemary.

"I am looking to see if you have anything fit to wear at the Hall," she remarked. "I think this will do;" and as she critically examined a white muslin embroidered dress, she added, "if this new one had not been clean, you could not have gone. Not that I wish you to go, dear. If I could have my will, I would keep you here, safe, happy—always." And she sighed.

"You have such queer notions of the

world, mother; and I know they are all wrong."

"I hope you may find them so," said her mother, sitting down and beginning to sew.

"I think it is wrong not to enjoy the beautiful world," cried Thea. "What is it all for? Just see how happy I am! There is the sunshine—I love sunshine—it is summer time too, with the flowers and the fruit—and there is papa wrapt up in me, and you always doing everything for me—and I can sing as much as I please, and Sir Robert cried when I sang, and said I was a genius; and to-morrow I am going into the world—and—oh, I forgot" (she made a rueful face), "there's Jack—oh, poor Jack!"

"Why, poor Jack?"

Thea confessed to his having "gone completely out of her mind" since Sir Robert came into the house with them. "I expect he will be nicely cross next time I see him," she said. "However, it can't be helped."

She was sobered for the time being, and

went quietly about the house helping her mother. But after their early dinner together (Dr. Biron had started for one of his "rounds" to see patients), the great yellow chariot from the Hall drove up and halted at the garden gate, and Lady Manners was assisted out by the tall footman, and came walking up the garden path, her little King Charles drooping his long ears over her arm.

Lady Manners, Sir Robert's second wife, although by some years his junior, had the same old-fashioned, protective, rather than patronizing, manner. She had a calm, deliberate utterance, as well as a calm deliberate way of looking at everything through her eyeglass. She delivered her invitation gracefully, and when Mrs. Biron—who had persisted, for some reason of her own, in remaining strictly within doors since the early days of her marriage—declined the dinner-party with thanks, she volunteered to "keep Althea under her wing."

"Of course, it will only be just a family party," she added. "Still, my dear, as you are not accustomed to society, you will be shy, perhaps."

Althea, sitting at her feet on a stool, smiled a peculiar smile. Then Lady Manners, stroking her hair and bending towards her, asked her what books she read. She had heard of some nice books for young people lately.

"I like Shakespeare," said Althea; "and I read all papa's books. He likes me to, because there is no one else to discuss his cases with, and he must talk them over with some one, you know; he wouldn't see them clearly if he didn't. Then there are the Lancet and the Medical Journal. They come once a week, and I look them through first, to tell him if there is anything worth reading."

"Do you quite approve of these-advanced ideas, Mrs. Biron?" asked Lady Manners, turning so abruptly to her hostess that she squeezed the little King

Charles, who uttered a piteous yelp. had hoped that these modern notions had scarcely gained ground in Elfield. Dear me, dear me! These railways and electric telegraphs are bringing about strange changes. Why, my dear," turning to Thea and examining her through her eyeglass, "young ladies in my day would have blushed if they had had to allude to a medical book; and as for reading one-well, you and I must have a little talk together." And she took a stately leave, determined to "take steps" for the future protection of the "innocent little child" who used to play about with the lap-dogs among the roses in the flower-garden at the Hall when she was a mere toddling, golden-haired baby.

"I have done for myself with her lady-ship," said Althea, after her departure. "You needn't warn me against the world, mother. I and the world won't get on together at all, I can see." Then she betook herself to the "study," and buried herself in her books.

After a still, thundery afternoon, the breeze returned and dispelled the banks of heavy, closely-packed cloud. The moon shone fitfully as the white veils of tufted vapour were wafted across the sky. There was a rustling stir among the foliage, the flowers quivered on their stems, and now and then a thud told of a falling apple or pear upon the sod, as Thea strolled into the garden for her evening walk. She had just reached the end of the centre path when some one sprang out of the bushes.

"Oh, Jack, how you frightened me!" she cried, with a gasp.

"See here," he said, holding out his watch-chain. "When I got home after you left me so unceremoniously this morning, I saw I had lost my locket. I searched the fields twice this afternoon, but I waited to come back here, where I was not wanted, —till it was dusk."

The locket was a little trinket Althea had given him as a keepsake. "You won't find it in the dark, you silly boy," said she.

He was silent, and, walking towards the greengage tree, began striking matches, and searching on the ground.

Althea followed him, and went down on her knees, pouncing upon shining pebbles among the gravel. Suddenly she cried out; a burning match-tip had fallen on her hand. "Now you have burnt me," she said. "That serves you right for being so surly."

He seized her hand and kissed it. Upon which she was content, and burst into a glowing account of the day and its adventures.

- "Of course you are not going?" was his remark, thrusting his hands in his pockets.
- "Not going?" she repeated, aghast. "Why, Jack, what on earth do you mean?"
- "That Dr. Biron is mad if he thinks of accepting such an invitation for you; that's what I mean. If Sir Robert wants some one to play the fool to amuse his grand

guests, why doesn't he hire some mountebank from London, and pay him or her, instead of degrading you? I call it an insult."

"I call your comparing me to a 'mountebank' who is 'hired to play the fool' an insult if you like," said Althea, wrathful. "But it is not worth while to be angry with you, Jack, when you are only jealous because you are not invited."

He paced the gravel for a few moments, then turned to her and said in a choking voice, "Althea, if you have any love for me at all, don't go to this party!"

"Give me a reason," she said coolly, "instead of talking nonsense. Then I will think about it."

"I cannot give you my reasons," he said vehemently; "if I did I should have to tell you a lot of things which you should not know. Although you call me a boy, Thea, and although I am a boy, I suppose, I live among men, and I learn, I hear, I understand. You know I never objected

to your ideas of seeing life, at home and abroad, if I could be with you to take care of you; but alone—I cannot bear to think of it."

"Well, between you and mother, you make 'the world' out a nice sort of bogie," said Althea; "the only effect upon me being that it excites my curiosity and adds the charm of forbidden fruit. But how is it papa does not talk like that? He is cleverer than both of you put together."

"Thea, when I lost that locket—your only gift, your precious bit of hair—I knew something was going to happen."

"Now you are going in for bathos, Jack."

He came towards her, and took her hands. At that instant the clouds parted, and a moon-ray fell pale upon his earnest, supplicating face, softening its plainness, adding a tender charm to its expression of anxious love.

"Jack, dear, I will do what you like," said Thea, subjugated. It was easier to you. I.

take her by storm than to subdue her, step by step.

"No," he said reverently placing his hands upon her shoulders, and gazing into her face; "I think I am wrong, Thea. What would your purity and goodness be worth if it could not stand a test? Go into this society, show your talents, be your own beautiful self, but remember that the men you will meet think lying no sin—when their lies are told to women."

"Do you mean to say Sir Robert is a liar, just because he liked my singing? Oh, Jack!"

"I don't mean Sir Robert.—If only all were like he is! Don't let us talk of this any more, darling.—I am so wretched.

—Let us spend our last moments together to-day in peace."

Thea, impressed in spite of herself, clung to his arm, and together they walked slowly towards the gate into the stable-yard.

"Jack, you will come in?"

He shook his head. "Not to-night," he

said, with a great sigh. "Perhaps—the day after to-morrow. Oh, Thea, when you are safe out of this, how thankful I shall be!"

- "The day after to-morrow, when I tell you all about the party, you will laugh at yourself more than any one else, I expect."
- "I hope so. But, Thea, do promise me one thing——"
 - "Anything you like."
- "Promise me that, whenever you are in any trouble or difficulty,—no matter what it is about, what circumstances you are in, —you will send for me."
- "Why should it be necessary, Jack? Are you going to give me up?"

They were standing in the shadow of a clump of shrubs between the outbuildings and the house.

"I give you up!" he said hoarsely; "it will rather be the other way, I expect. Do you think I don't know that the only reason you thought of me as a husband is because there was nobody else better?

Why, you as good as told me so, and I loved you too dearly not to take you under any circumstances. But now you will see other men, and they will see you—and I must bear my fate, whatever it may be. I have such a feeling that we shall never be together again as we are to-night, Thea—that do, for pity's sake, promise me this."

- "I promise," said Thea; "though I don't understand what it is all about!"
- "Pray God you never may," he muttered; and seizing her hands, pressed them to his breast, covered them with kisses, and was gone.
- "Jack!" cried Thea, with a sudden sense of loss, of desolation. But he was gone, and she stood gazing at the calm moonlit scene through her rising tears, listening to the footsteps growing fainter and fainter.

At that moment she clung to the thoughts of Jack and her mother—and hated the very notion of this dangerous world

they seemed to hold in such abhorrence. "I shall stay at home, like mother," she said to herself, with a sob. "I don't care if no one ever hears me sing any more.—I shan't go to the Hall to-morrow,—and I shall marry Jack as soon as ever I can, that's what I shall do."

CHAPTER II.

ELFIELD HALL.

To see Elfield at its best, you should be on the brow of the slope on which the village lies, under the old elm-tree. A rustic little alehouse stands back from the road, the worn wooden benches and seats under the storm-beaten remains of an ancient oak, presided over by a tall sign-post—where the ferocious effigy of a red dragon is growing milder and pinker as the eastern gales make for him, spring after spring, when they rush across the twenty miles of flats that lie between these fertile slopes and the sea.

On one hand you see rich corn-fields, or tree-scattered grass-land dotted with grazing cattle. Patches of woodland glow green in the morning sunshine. As the white, round-breasted cloud-tufts sail softly across the blue sky, the shadows skim lightly across the yellow, waving corn, and over the green turf, casting strange patterns upon the trees, shrubs and haystacks around the white farmhouse yonder, whose column of pale blue smoke quivers unsteadily as it rises. You draw deep breaths of the fresh life-bringing air, scented with the perfume of newlyploughed earth and of the roses in yonder garden—and freshened by a salt flavour brought up from the sea by the rapid rushing river—which lies as a dazzling silver streak against the horizon.

Then you turn and see the village,—a street of uneven houses, thatched cottages leaning against each other in tiny gardens, and rows of demure little dwellings, each one trying to outvie the other in a prim neatness which reminds you of a row of "charity girls" with their regulation demeanour, and pursed-up lips. The shops,

—the butcher's open pent-house, with the perennial bullock's heart hanging close against the shut gate, at once the temptation and despair of village dogs,—and the baker's, generally floury of aspect. you pass, a bare-armed man with white cap and apron brings another black tinful of odorous steaming loaves and adds them to those already on the counter, which the trim baker's wife is serving out to some big girls and little boys. Then comes the "general dealer's,"—one big window as full of smocks, hobnailed boots, corduroys, and big coloured cotton handkerchiefs, as the other is of cheeses, butter-kegs, sugarloaves, bundles of "dips," and wooden boxes of all shapes and sizes containing the hidden treasures of grocery. The tiny, unobtrusive little cottage windows, with the rows of apples and the glass bottles of sweets are shrines seldom, even in schooltime, without juvenile worshippers. is a little girl now, in a large cotton sunbonnet, carrying a baby nearly as big as

herself, so intent in looking through the window at her little brother within, who is "spending his farden," that she takes no notice of what is passing around her, till the toddling boy comes out, and they share the spoil. Few people are about; one or two laggards hang about the open door of the Manners Arms, a square, red-brick house, where a vine flourishes and twines lovingly around the lions rampant, the arms of the Manners family since it suddenly came into existence in the reign of King James the A little old woman in a big Second. black bonnet, her rusty gown covered with a huge white apron, passes down the street on the shady side, clanking some big keys. She unlocks the iron gate under the grey stone archway, toddles down the shady avenue of lime-trees, and disappears into the old ivy-covered church, with crumbling Norman tower, the crazy case of an ancient peal of bells. The old lady "keeps the church." She is wife to the sexton, who on Sundays is verger, and

ushers the congregation to their seats solemnly, if totteringly, his sign of office, the tall wand topped with the golden ball, in his hand. On Sunday, even when the wand is at rest against a pillar during service, "old Winch" has a lofty air which betokens forgetfulness of his weekday avocations. But if you come across him when he is digging, or weeding, or "tidying" one of the green mounds, he is cheery and conversational. He will relate tales appertaining to the crooked, leaning headstones, will scrape away lichen that has encroached upon date or epitaph, will take you mysteriously to the quietest spot in "God's Acre," behind the church, and tell you the sad story of the "poor soul" whose clay forgotten and abhorred below . flattened, weedy mound, in hushed tones. He has a tender word for the latest baby there, of whom he speaks as a kindly shepherd might talk of his last dead lamb; and he waxes proudly official when he leads you to the "Manners Mausoleum,"

a marble chapel, all heavy roof and door, which contains those massive oaken coffins in which he takes especial pride; "all made out of them oaks in the park, grown in their own soil," he adds, appending the rumour that Sir Robert—long may he live!—has chosen and marked the tree which must fall to yield material for his last couch.

The village slopes gradually down from the modest public-house, the Red Dragon, till it ends with the rustic school-house, erected by the present Lady Manners. Opposite the school is the lane leading to the park; at the corner of this is the forge; next door is the wheelwright's; and between these and the church Dr. Biron's cottage lies snugly in its garden, screened from the road by an even row of well-pruned elms and a chain-fence.

Few in the village can remember when Dr. Biron was not the "spirit of the place." The handsome old man, with the proud presence, animated manners, and sparkling eyes was once the golden-haired, brightfaced "Harry Biron," a lad sent over to a well-known public school by his rich father, estate and slave owner in Jamaica. Young Biron was renowned for his cheery good-humour, brilliancy, and "dash;" but he did little more during his school-life than make friends—friends whom he declared he could and would not leave. For when the summons came for him to return to the colony and "settle down," his reply was an ardent appeal that he might remain "at home"—as the colonists call the mother country—to join the army, and of course to be a glory to his family and an honour to Great Britain.

If colonials in those days had a defect, that defect was vanity. Harry Biron had appealed to his father's weakness, and thereupon carried his point, and before many months had elapsed, had a commission in a "crack" regiment of dragoons, with full possession of his fortune.

As of old, Harry Biron "made friends."

But the manufacture of adult dragoon friends was more pecuniarily exhausting than the weaving of school acquaintanceships. After eighteen months, Biron found himself with a couple of thousands only. Counting the cost of being a "bold dragoon" brought about a revulsion of feeling. Besides having had enough of the empty racket and roar of the mess, he was plunged in the pale recalling atmosphere of reactionary disillusion. Gilded, wired champagne bottles, paint and powder, may charm under the glamour of evening lassitude and candlelight, but turn on a stream of sunshine!—In his case, this stream of honest, truthful daylight brought about the sale of his commission, and the commencement of his life as a medical student.

Naturally clever—with a "prestige," the fascination of a prepossessing individuality heightened by continual contact with well-bred men—Harry Biron sailed through, or even flew over, ordinary difficulties.

Crotchety examiners were soothed into equanimity when the handsome, welldressed young candidate, adorned with the indescribable passport of good breeding, deferentially presented himself for the viva voce contest. When those beautiful blue eyes sought the floor, and the chiselled under-lip was bitten by the white teeth in the anxiety of a retracted thought, who could blame the sages if they gave a clue to a reply which they felt could not be actually wanting to so charming, wellappointed a specimen of humanity? Who could find fault with them when a glance of alarm and appeal brought about the speech, "Well, never mind this, it is a minor point; let us pass on"? Certainly not Harry Biron, when he took his degree, and immediately proceeded to invest in a partnership, offered by advertisement to moneyed young aspirants by the then aging doctor of Elfield.

This old doctor was a pedant, and a bachelor. Harry lived with him some

years; as soon as he had learnt all that his student life had failed to teach him, he "bought the doctor out,"-bought his business, house, and library. Then, considering with a certain natural common sense which was his most useful mental gift, that "a doctor can't get on properly till he is married," he cast about for a He knew there was a girl, the wife. daughter of a city merchant, who for love of him was refusing eligible suitors. One specimen of the sex was to him "pretty much the same as another,"—at least, so he acknowledged to himself. And Althea Wood had a small fortune. "She will do as well as any one else," he thought. And with this sentiment he carelessly won and married a woman with a calm deep nature, whose feeling for him was akin to adoration—Althea's mother.

Harry—or rather Doctor—Biron's estimation of marriage as connected with the medical profession proved so far correct, that soon after he became a husband his

practice not only trebled but quadrupled. The gift of fascination which had carried him so triumphantly through school and student life was still his "Open, Sesame." Women dared acknowledge a liking for the doctor, now that they could preface or supplement the declaration with, "And you should see his wife; she is really charming." His popularity with the men -initiated by his interest in their complaints, when they had any, and his patient "bonhomie"—was augmented and kept up by his social qualities. The peals of laughter, the roars of merriment, which penetrated even to the drawing-room, where the ladies gossiped and yawned over their coffee after long dinner-parties -bore testimony that the crack storyteller of the well-known mess in the -th Dragoons, had by no means lost his masculinely attractive gift. And as for the children? When he took them on his knee, and said pleasant chatty things, and produced sweets from his pocket ("doctors'

sweets, quite harmless, I assure you, madam"), and last, but not least—for child-hood loves brightness—smiled upon them with that broad, sunshiny smile, they adored him; and the sound of the doctor's gig-wheels and fast-trotting cob was the signal for an outbreak of joy among the juniors of the family visited.

And he loved children more than he chose to confess; and as year by year came and went, and no pets but cats, dogs, and birds claimed his immediate sympathies, disappointment grew sharper, keener; he went out earlier, returned later, and though it was impossible to him to be dull—not to dwell in the sunshine—he was often irritable, and said sharp, almost reproachful, things to the tender yearning woman who, on her side, shrank into the shade, and moped.

A moping which deepened and became a secret indulgence in a passionate grief when rumours reached her of the beautiful women who admired her husband—of one, you. 1. in particular, who not only did not attempt to disguise, but seemed to glory in her admiration—the handsome, unscrupulous wife of a hunting squire—one of the "three-bottle men," who, it may in his wife's justification be said, was, as a spouse, "no better than he should be."

Dark hours were spent by Mrs. Biron when her husband took to "riding to hounds," and, when he did return home, could speak of nothing but Mrs. Glenny's exploits in the hunting-field. But the climax of her trouble was reached when one Sunday the doctor had suddenly been called to a patient amidst the sorting of his papers in the escritoire in his bedroom, and she afterwards found upon the floor a netted purse, containing a portrait "To Harry, from Cornelia," and a long curl of shining hair.

She dropped it as if it had stung her, left it there upon the carpet, and letting the doctor find it, said no word; but from that day she remained at home, would accept no invitation, and lived the life of a hermit, except when there were some sick poor to be visited, or when there was something to be done for the husband whose neglect might have killed the last remnant of self-love in her womanly heart, but had failed to touch that strong centre of her nature, her passionate devotion to the lover of her youth.

Youth indeed was passing, as a dream that was dreamt. The quiet middle-aged woman, with the hair streaked with grey put away so carefully under a snowy muslin cap, whose sole interests were housekeeping, rearing flowers, and cherishing the doctor's pets, was the very last subject for village gossip. But suddenly Mrs. Biron became the old women's heroine, the one theme to be discussed; and the astonished exclamations, "Laws!" "Now, who'd 'ave thought it?" "If you hadn't ha' told me, I wouldn't 'ave believed it," knew no end. Curious eyes watched the middle-aged pair, noticed that Mrs. Biron's

pale face looked happier, while the doctor went about with an increased importance of manner, and at times looked absent and impressed, an expression which intensified so as to chase all careless hilarity from his face, when on a certain stormy February night, when a howling gale was driving the broken clouds across a wintry sky, a cold moon gleaming fitfully upon the black skeleton trees and withered shrubs with the chilliness of a satirical smile—he bent over his seemingly lifeless wife, and laid a warm, crying little girl babe in her pale arms.

The repressed, stricken soul seemed drifting into the unknown shadows. The lonely woman heard dimly; her stiffening eyes were fixed upon the window, and felt rather than saw the icy moonbeams, when a cry, a warm burden laid against her breast, seemed to grasp her nature and drag it rudely, almost cruelly, back to pain and active life. She seemed, as it were, face to face with the solemn angel of

Death, who stood with his calm hands folded upon his sword; but there was no welcome upon that great majestic countenance, only a pitying dismissal; and as the vision faded, her heart gave a wild throb, a bound, and burst into a new life which rose up in response to that wailing infant voice. Althea Biron raised her languid eyes, recognized her husband, and with a feeble caress welcomed her only child.

The child who was to link her parents' sundered lives—who was, so to speak, to walk through life with one soft hand in his, one in hers.

When the tender baby—who appeared to look into the world around her in sheer amazement, such astonished perplexity was in those wondering dark eyes—came into the downstairs daily life of the cottage, the ordinary household seemed, as it were, to collapse in the presence of a new, totally unexpected, and baneful star. The very flowers (doubtless because they had missed the careful tending of

motherly hands) withered and drooped with a dejected air. The little King Charles growled at the baby, and, retreating under the sofa, remained glaring with his black-diamond eyes and resisting all efforts to coax him out, with shrill snarls, much showing of his tiny white teeth, and baleful side glances when the tempters desisted. When little Thea, suddenly delighted, gave a crow, the ringdoves stayed their cooing, fluffed their feathers, and were huffy; and the white skye terrier gave a short bark, and taking refuge under the sideboard, where the blue china water-dish for the refreshment of the house-dogs generally was situated, glowered in the shade and refused to be comforted. When the baby "took her walks abroad," in her nurse's arms, in the front garden in the early spring sunshine under a parasol, the cockatoo screamed furiously, raising his yellow crest, and resisting all blandishments to "scratch poll" as insults; and the parrot retreated

disdainfully to the end of his perch in the big brass cage hung upon the great firtree, and polished his beak, seemingly absorbed in self-communion. Only the great yard-dog, the Newfoundland, wagged his tail and welcomed the new specimen of the young of his human friends by licking the soft fat hand; and the sleek horses looked round and sniffed graciously when the infant was put upon their backs and twined her pink fingers in their manes.

By-and-by, "the pets" accepted their position, and tolerated the intruder as inevitable, as a superior specimen of playmate, mysteriously, unaccountably installed among them by the heads of the family. These were the days when Thea—whose enforced infant silence was a torment to herself and her surroundings, her efforts to understand and to be understood leading to storms of baffled infantine rage—began to toddle about and stammer her first "Why?" and "What dat for?" Her tongue once

loosed, the rushing stream of passionate inquiry which could be lost alone in the ocean of eternal Truth, burst forth. nurse, a bright, good-tempered village girl, was patient, but even she came to plead "such a pain in her poor head," or that prevalent malady of nursemaids, "a bone in her arm." Then Thea, always wistful, restless, unsatisfied, would toddle out and peep into the stable, where the groom was generally ready to perch the tiny child on the corn-bin, and be catechised while he "hissed" away, cleaning the harness,-or she would take refuge "up the garden," with her friend Tyler, the stalwart, slowspoken gardener, who, carefully extracting remnants of worms, beetles, and such living freight from his big wheelbarrow, would make her a cushion of grass or lucerne, and wheel her anywhere she pleased. wore a broad grin on his stolid face during his interviews with little Thea; there was something to his rural matter-of-fact nature so intensely comical about the tiny cross-

questioner, and to the best of his ability. he told her the truth. The sharp-eyed groom would fence her questions. When asked, "What dat?" he would say, "Well, it ain't a brush or a comb for your 'air, is it?" or (desperately) "it ain't a sponge to wash your face with, now, is it?" Tyler, when interrogated, as, for instance, what plants come out of, replied triumphantly, "Seed." And when he was further pressed as to the impossibility of so large a flowering thing being altogether seed, and seed only, he would suggest as "heverythink comes out of the earth, and it seem'd to 'im as heverythink went back to Just to think, now-not only corpises, wot all folks knows is buried in the churchyard, and peace rest 'em! but all wegetables wot ain't wanted get back to the ground som'ow, and ain't bad manure, wen yer come to think on it. Then there's the animiles-don't they get buried in the ground wen they're dead? There ain't no place for 'em above it." An undeniable

triumph of fact over fanciful inquiry, which made the good gardener proud till Thea turned round as he was wheeling her "down the garden," on the top of a barrow of lucerne for the horses, and asked him, "What earth was made of?" a question which he almost testily and summarily disposed of by saying, "Why, earth is earth, just as the sun is the sun, ain't it? and the moon the moon."

"But things don't grow out of the sun and the moon, Tyler."

"Well, you'd better ask yer pa."

This was the final refuge of the catechised, which was a small cause to bring about great effects. Through the reference to "ask her papa," Althea came to know Jack. For, startling Dr. Biron, when one day as he was admiringly watching his darling eating her early dinner of minced mutton, she looked up and asked him point blank "what earth was made of?" he determined that the child "ought to have more play," and going straight to his wife,

recommended immediate playmates for Althea.

"But there aren't any little girls you would like Thea to play with, Harry," was the anxious mother's reply.

Knitting his brow, the doctor suggested "Jack." He liked honest, kind-faced Jack, whose dead mother he had vainly tried to hold back in life.

- "But—Jack is so much older than baby, and he is a boy."
 - "He is none the worse for that."
 - "Well, dear, just as you please."

Not many days after this interchange of sentiment, little Jack—in a blue tunic and a big embroidered collar, with pendent cotton tassels, that made him, especially as his hair was carefully curled, resemble "dog Toby," on the title-page of *Punch*—came to tea.

After he and Thea had partaken of their bread and butter and dark plum-cake, and Thea had confided to him the interesting fact that there were not only sausage-rolls, but real tarts containing strawberry jam, for supper, and that he might have a glass of orange wine if he liked,—Jack manfully stated the object of his visit.

"You know we've got to play," he suggested.

"I hate play," said Thea, recoiling.

"Oh no, you won't, when you've tried it," said Jack with determination, resolved to "stick to his guns," particularly when such constancy involved jam tarts and sausage-rolls.

"I will talk to you as much as you like," suggested Thea.

"That isn't play," concluded Jack; "let's go into the garden, and try some games." And he exerted himself so effectually that Thea was immediately converted to the exhilarating, faintly exciting charm of hide-and-seek.

From that day the two met constantly. Still, even Jack could not affect Althea's passion to *know*. She "wore every one out," until she could read. Then she, as it

were, disappeared from the homely cottage life, her little voice was stilled as the tiresome buzzing of a blue-bottle when he has escaped through the window into the outer air. She had indeed discovered a vast outside world, which was slowly to unfold before her dazzled mind as some monster opening flower—the world of Books.

One of her first observations had been that when people seemed to go to sleep while their eyes travelled about as if they were hovering over the printed lines—they were generally more ready to answer questions when they awoke from their mysterious half-slumber. She also noticed that while the people at church listened with respectful awe while the clergyman read to them out of a book on Sundays, it was also out of a book that nurse got the beautiful stories she told her. Therefore. very early in her young life, no book was less to her than a fetish; and she would steal into the "study," as the doctor's little consulting-room and library was called, and

gaze at the rows of books that cleaved to one another in close ranges from floor to ceiling with awed, passionate longing. If she could only read! The power came suddenly and unexpectedly. There was a story in a certain amusing book which she had asked for so constantly that she knew each word from first to last. One day the nurse let her have the book to look at. Before she gave it back Thea knew what those queer up-and-down separated figures called "words" were. With this tiny capital she invested boldly, attempting to read the whole book, coaxing different people to tell her the words she did not know; and therefore succeeding in effecting an entry into this wonderful Book-world before any one had dreamt of teaching her the alphabet.

Once familiar with them, awe of the books gave way to love. When "Nurse was busy"—her normal state—Thea took refuge in the study. "Oh, my loves!" she would exclaim, when with whole armfuls

of volumes she would curl herself up in the big chair and lose herself in the wonders of history, drama, physiology—anything that came first. Before she was eight, she knew Romeo and Juliet by heart, and had somehow found out that a play was like a storynot to be depended upon for actual veracity. It was fact that moved her most. sympathies had gone out to the royal Mary, to the beheaded king, to the victim Strafford, when wandering through the picturegalleries at the Hall—and she read each word of their terrible histories with a horror and anguish that even Jack's cheeriness in the sunshiny, matter-of-fact, out-of-door world failed to dispel. The eerie, haunted sensation forced her to find an outlet for her emotions, and led her to pick out and to sing strange, crude chants at the old piano in the drawing-room;—led her in fact to find that the unwieldy, painful impressions gathered by reading, could be cast forth from her spirit in melody, in song. The homely, country life—the drives and walks

through the sweet natural beauty of woods and lanes—the cheerful games with Jack and the animals, might be a mental opiate, but they could not relieve her oppression of spirit as could the outlet of music.

Thea yearned to paint the subjects that affected her, or to mould them into sculpture; but her attempts were such cruel failures that she clung to music, and to music only. She was taught by the school-mistress, who played the organ in the village church, and when her little Jacobite ballad drew tears from the old baronet, this was in fact all the outside instruction she had had.

The village schoolmaster taught her "writing and ciphering," but he was by no means enamoured of his task. Thea was so unpleasantly pursuant—inquisitive. He would return to his wife with his hair ruffled, declaring that "that child of the doctor's" gave him more trouble than "all his boys put together." He could not frown, rap his desk, and ery "Silence," when the

fragile, large-eyed little lady asked awkward questions. He must conceal his annoyance, and reply as best he might. "The sooner she gets into Euclid the better, sir," was his observation, when the doctor somewhat proudly and pompously inquired, as a mere matter of form, as to Althea's 'progress. "Miss Biron requires explanation of the most self-evident truisms. Euclid will keep her well employed." Indeed, the rural pedagogue longed with a longing spiced with revenge to confront this precocious, "uncanny" girl with a mental puzzle. Euclid in hand, he would be master of the situation—a reflection which proved that at present he was not.

As years went by, the child grew more restless, more eager, more worn. No one seemed able to tell her how she came to be as she was—and, as she worded it, "what it was all for?" One day—the most eventful day of her curious childhood, the answer came swift, sharp, a very Jupiter's thunderbolt.

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She was in the garden. The sky was heavy with gathering thunderclouds, the air was still and sultry, except when sudden fitful gusts came chasing the leaves, drooping and yellow after the long summer's sun-rays, from the shuddering boughs. There was a dejected, oppressive stillness the very flowers hung limply upon their stems, and the animals were drowsy and depressed. They crept away from Thea, drearily, if apologetically. Her cheery human friends, the gardener and the groom, were nowhere to be found—and the child was alone. She stood just outside the garden-gate, on a black coal-sprinkled path under a tarred fence that divided the field from the garden. The walnut-trees were green against the dark sky, the slender larches shivered whitely as if blanched by fear into very ghosts of trees—then suddenly a bell tolled, the passing bell, and a robin fluttered from a tree, and perching on the fence trilled out a mournful song which sounded like a sudden outcry of passionate grief.

She felt as one who has come upon a number of people plunged in a sadness of which he does not know the cause. She felt that underlying an actual, matter-of-fact, daily life was some great, awful, invisible existence. Then, as by a sudden flash she knew that this was the life she was always craving to reach, to see, to touch, to handle, to cling to with a desperate clasp, the life that puzzled, shifted, evaded, sternly kept aloof, and she was as one in prison, who hears a loved voice without, and knows that there, out of reach, is light, air, love, freedom.

"It is God," she cried in despair, "and He has shut us all away." And as the big thunder-drops fell, as if the very heavens wept for compassion, Althea shed perhaps the bitterest tears of her life.

At that moment Jack came running up the garden, sent by Mrs. Biron to fetch Thea in before the storm broke.

"Oh, Jack!" she said, and accustomed as he was to his companion's "curious

ways" the boy was startled by her wild, pale face. Nor would she say what was the matter, refusing to play indoor games, and sitting huddled up in a big chair, watching the sheets of rain beat upon the windows till the thunder-shower was over, and Jack went home.

As the children grew, and gradually developed into young man and young woman, Jack ceased to expect Althea to be ordinary. But in spite of her moods, his love for her grew with his growth, till his whole nature cried allegiance—he was hers.

Till Althea suggested a closer tie between them, his honest, unreflective mind had been untroubled. He lived in the present, devoting himself to Thea when with her, and otherwise completely absorbed in the occupation of the moment, whether overseeing for his father, or doing other farmbusiness, or studying, or cricketing, boating, or hunting. He thought Althea's singing very wonderful, and her musical

compositions extraordinary, if somewhat "witchy," like herself, just as he thought her knowledge of books greater than any other woman's alive—albeit he had not much opinion of books as helps to human life. For, finding that in "useful" matters he had common sense to guide him where Althea was nonplussed, he concluded that "keeping your eyes open," and "taking things for what they are worth, taught you more than all the books in the world."

His belief in his own common sense consoled him when the thought of being Althea's husband made him uneasy. He never really doubted that he would have to assume the responsibility, till that day in the garden, the day of Sir Robert's sudden appearance, of the loss of his locket, and of Althea's announcement that she was to go to the dinner-party at the Hall, a party which he knew would not only include an "artist-fellow," from London, and Lord Belmont, the "music-maniac," but the Honourable John Clifford, a man,

the report of whose fascination for the opposite sex had reached even to Elfield.

What would be the effect of Althea upon these people? What would be the effect of these people upon her? As Jack went moodily about that day of the dinner-party, the day spent by Thea in an ecstasy of anticipation, his common sense appeared to have deserted him, and the images wrought by his excited imagination were as wild and tormenting as any of Thea's visions that he used to try to scare away. He even fancied that all the well-known sounds of his country life melted into a warning cry, "She has escaped you; you have lost her—for ever."

The red walls and turrets of Elfield Hall were glowing in the sunset against the shadowy background of huge, leafy oaks, as Thea and her father drove through the park, the carriage-wheels speeding noise-lessly along the soft turf, the herds of deer, suddenly aware of their approach when the horse was close upon them,

springing to their feet and cantering away to seek shelter among the bracken in the open. Ushered into the hall, they were met by Sir Robert, who after greeting them, commanded the powdered footmen to re-open the nail-studded oaken door.

"There, my dear Miss Biron," he said, trembling more than usual with some emotional excitement, "there it is, you see," and he pointed with his cane to a picture over the huge fire-place, upon which the red light shone as the door opened—the portrait of a slender youth in highland dress, with a fair, melancholy face. "I have kept my word, and Charles Edward is where all must see him; but I have another picture to show you of one of his own race who lives, and who singularly resembles him. We shall pass through the picture-gallery on our way to the drawing-room."

He offered Althea his arm, and the two laboured up the broad, shallow staircase hung with pictures of ferocious beasts, of terrible sea-fights. Dr. Biron followed. At the head of the staircase they turned into "the queen's corridor," the picturegallery proper (the state rooms at the Hall were each and all called "the queen's" since the red walls had housed Elizabeth the Great on her way to Tilbury to inspect her fleet, before the estate was in the possession of the present family). The huge pictures, their tints dark or pallid with age, were darker or paler than ever in the twilight and in the faint light of the rising moon which came in through the long, narrow windows; the graceful forms and faintly coloured draperies of the family beauties caught a ghostly hue, as did the vividly painted figure before which Sir Robert paused, asking Thea what she thought of that? "Quite one of R---'s masterpieces," he said, naming the first modern portrait painter. "Do you not see the resemblance?"

The portrait was that of a straight, proud man, evidently past the rough roundness

of masculine youth. The face, sharply white against a dark background, was clearly cut as that of a statue. Massive curls fell upon a slightly receding forehead, a somewhat heavy brow lent mystery to piercing eyes. But the striking feature of the hard, though handsome face, was the mouth. A long moustache was somewhat swept away by the painter's brush, to show full chiselled lips that closed as scornfully as those of Byron in Phillips' famous portrait.

Thea gave one glance, then looked aside. The face was unpleasant to her. "Like the Prince—like Charles Edward in the portrait downstairs?" she asked, in her abrupt, earnest way. "Not—one—bit. I should hate that man."

"My dear young lady," expostulated Sir Robert—interrupted by the sound of a shrill young voice, the rustling of feminine attire, and the gleam at the end of the corridor of a light, evidently held to ensure the safe passage down the winding "bedroom staircases" of the lady who swept towards them—a tall, beautiful girl, her white satin dress gleaming in the evening light, the jewels sparkling on her neck and arms as she came along rapidly, fitting on her gloves.

"Looking at the portrait?" she carelessly remarked, and would have passed them, but Sir Robert arrested her with—

"My dear, this is the young lady I spoke about; Miss Biron, this is my cousin, Lady Maud."

"How do you do?" said the beauty, with one glance at Thea. Then, still busy with her gloves, she added, "The man was here this afternoon with that horse, cousin. Did you see him? What did you think of him?"

Sir Robert replied as he followed Lady Maud and Thea into the drawing-room. Thea, with burning cheeks—wounded and repressed by being voted into insignificance by this magnificently endowed specimen of her sex—felt as if she would have "given anything" to rush away—home—there and

then. "Well-born, beautiful as she is," was her inward comment, "she might have been—gracious."

The moving forms in the great drawingroom were unrecognizable. The sunset,
now faded to a dull pink deadened by
streaks of cloud, failed to show the massive
carved furniture Thea knew so well. How
often had she sat in that broad windowseat—towards which she now glided with a
feeling that she would like to hide herself
—peopling the grand old chamber with
creatures of her imagination! How often
had she pictured to herself Elizabeth, surrounded by her obsequious courtiers, seated
upon that very throne-like couch, from
which came Lady Manners' voice, her
measured tones raised—

"What is that white thing flitting across the room? Is it Miss Biron?"

Thea had to pass a group of gentlemen, among whom was the doctor, and, skirting the little china-covered tables and quaint stools, to present herself to her hostess.

"My dear, I am very glad to see you. But this fad of Sir Robert's of not having lights till they announce dinner, makes my glasses useless. Sarah" (to a lady sitting by her, whose cap and majestic form were in black silhouette against the window), "this is the little girl I told you about, little Althea. She used to sit at my feet on a stool when she was quite a baby, with all the other pets; and really, she is so mixed up in my mind with the birds, and those dear spaniels, and our roses, that I can hardly remember which is which. And now I hear from Sir Robert she can sing like any of the birds, and that she will sing to us after dinner, won't you, love?" (with a shake of the hand she had been holding in her soft, mittened fingers). "I have only just been telling Lady Belmont how dearly I love all young things, the calves and young lambs, even the poor little unfledged birds."

"Youth is all very well in its place," said Lady Belmont, in a stern voice, which

had a masculine ring (Thea, though she could not see her, immediately pictured her as possessing cold eyes and a huge Roman nose, and was not wrong in her estimate); "but really, the educational method applied to the lower classes in the present day, and the prevailing tone of the literature, and the tacit acceptance of American customs, are all so against the theories of the clergy and all right-minded people that——"

A flash of light from the doorway, the sudden entrance of two footmen holding aloft lighted candelabra, who separated and stood on either side, while a voice said, "Dinner is served, my lady;" then the appearance in the waxlight blaze of a man, tall, handsome ("the portrait come to life," as Thea thought), drowned, for her ears at least, the remainder of Lady Belmont's opinions.

As the pale, black-haired man came from the light into the shade, Thea instinctively recoiled. Lady Maud was "bad enough," she thought, but how could she ever sing, chilled and repelled as she already was, before that man? There was something to her so withering and powerfully reducive about his presence that the sensitive girl shrank and palpitated as a frightened bird before the cold eye of a serpent. At the instant she saw him the memory of the sunshiny, peaceful garden, and her faithful, warm-hearted Jack, came to her almost cruelly. "Oh, that I had never come!" she inwardly cried. "I had no idea it would be like this!" Indeed, her vague dreams of this evening had scarcely included a series of sharp, painful impressions.

The branches of wax-candles at rest, Thea saw that besides Lady Belmont, the beautiful Maud, the original of the portrait, the clergyman and his quiet little wife, Sir Robert, Lady Manners, and her father, there were two strange masculine figures. One, who gambolled toward Lady Manners like some frisky monster (as Sir Robert walked out of the room escorting the

matronly Lady Belmont), was a tall, big old man, with floating grey locks, a mincing gait, and a keen, small-featured face (Lord Belmont), the other was an insignificant little person, a tiny bundle of extremes, his broadcloth black and shining, his shirt-front dazzlingly white, his curled hair a barber's despair, his demeanour the essence of respectful deference, his very eyes seeking the ground lest they should offend, his tightly-gloved hands falling into a supplicating attitude that mutely apologized for his presence.

"Is he one of the men-servants?" wondered Thea, as—while the original of the portrait followed Sir Robert, Lady Maud on his arm—Dr. Biron offered his escort to Mrs. Brown, the vicaress, and the kind, if somewhat pompous, vicar came towards her, and assured her that he would take her under his protecting wing. "No, he can't be that" (for, looking back, she saw him meekly following the dinner procession). "The men-servants looked as

if they knew their 'place;' he looks as if he had no 'place' to know."

The big dining-hall—decorated with sixteenth-century distortions in angular portraits (each exquisitely elaborated in the region of the bulky skirts, each carefully and distinctly signed in the dark left-hand corner), and also adorned with huge heads of foreign and British antlered deer—was scarcely lighted by the myriads of wax-lights that graced the table and were placed at intervals against the walls. The corners were in darkness; while the light that played upon the glittering jewels or the glistening eyes of the ladies who graced that old oaken board, was subdued and, if anything, beautifying.

Thea, in centre-table, equidistant to Sir Robert and to Lady Manners, found herself opposite the incomprehensible little man. While the hum of voices, the cautious footsteps of careful attendants, sounded an accompaniment to the measured mastications of the worthy vicar, she was absorbed

in wonderment as to who he was, until, at last, she turned suddenly to her worthy pastor, and asked for enlightenment in a hurried whisper.

"A musical fellow—a protégée of Lord Belmont's; accompanies people when they sing."

Thea gazed in horror. "That—an artist?" she gasped.

- "I believe they call them so, in lieu of a better title. But you know, Althea, most of these professionals are scarcely respectable enough to be brought into English homes. I am sure that little man, Herr Vogel, is respectable, or he would not be here."
 - "Herr-what?" asked Thea.
- "Herr Vogel," replied her protector, calmly munching his beef.
 - "That is the German for bird."
- "I believe there is a suspicion of the Israelite in his descent," mumbled the vicar. "At one time, Althea, the Germans insisted upon the Jews publicly relinquishvol. I.

ing their Biblical names (I will not say what these are, because voices travel, you know, and he might hear us). They recommended them to assume names which would distinguish them from Christians, such as animals, flowers, etc. No doubt our friend opposite cherishes in secret the name of the tribe to which he belongs. Ah! the Jews were a great people."

"I don't believe he can play; and I know if he accompanies me, I shan't be able to sing."

The vicar cast an amused glance towards "that spoilt child of the doctor's." "Ah, my child, you will live and learn," he observed, while helping himself largely to salmi—a rebuke which was as a sudden shock of cold to Althea. She, as it were, "pulled herself together," and before Lady Manners gave the signal to rise, had determined that "she would show them all what she could do."

The ladies, with their sweeping rustlings, shut out—there was a lull, while the par-

ticular claret was carefully placed before Sir Robert, and the many serving-men withdrew, possibly to satirize and roar over the dinner conversation of their masters, in the freedom of the servants' hall.

"Biron," then began the old baronet, in a confidential anticipatory manner, after the claret had made a circle of the table, and the gentlemen were proved to have accepted his invitation, "Pray smoke, those who like it," by the faintly bitter aroma of the pale blue rings that softened the lengthening candle-flames as they rose into the darkness,—"I will allow you one story; but only one, mind."

"My dear Sir Robert, my well of anecdote is dry, I can assure you, absolutely dry."

Dr. Biron was leaning back in his chair, smoking a cigarette. He knew Sir Robert disliked smoke, so, in spite of the temptation of a box of choice Havanas placed near to him, he forewent the enjoyment of anything stronger. But his rubicund face

glowed, his bright eyes shone with anticipation, as he glanced round at Althea's audience, as he imagined the faces of the art-lover, Lord Belmont, and "that cold, sarcastic fellow" Clifford, when his singing-bird should launch out her wild, fascinating notes.

"I am hardly sorry to hear that Dr. Biron is not in a story-telling humour, gentlemen," said Sir Robert. "Greatly though I appreciate his witty anecdotes—many a time as they have set this table in a roar—I can promise even a greater attraction to-night, especially to my good friend the Herr yonder, and to you, Belmont, and you, Clifford—as music-lovers. We shall hear Dr. Biron's charming daughter sing."

Silence. Lord Belmont frowned slightly as he cracked his nuts—would have felt offended indeed at his cousin's suggestion that with his experience he could be interested in "some village songstress," had he not remembered that "the old man

was getting childish,"-little Vogel smiled apologetically as he looked towards his patron to "take his cue," then finding it, subsided into downcast gravity, and played with the orange-peel on his plate with his dessert-knife; and Clifford held his handsome chin in the air, and flicked off his ash with statue-like indifference. Then the vicar, with ready tact, plunged into politics, the doctor struggled to conceal his annoyance with "those aristocratic upstarts," and a discussion arose which bade fair to conquer the claims of the drawing-room—when, in obeyance of Sir Robert's orders, a servant announced that "coffee was served in the queen's withdrawing-room," and the old gentleman rose, saying with expectant dignity, "I do not wish to disturb you, gentlemen, of course, but you will be good enough to excuse me, since my lady summons me to coffee."

Naturally, the male guests followed their host, and adjourned to the drawing-room,

where Lady Maud had been reclining in a corner alone, and Thea had shrunk into the shadow behind Lady Belmont and Lady Manners, who were holding a discussion on the subject of National Schools. At least, Lady Belmont was giving Mrs. Brown, who sat on her right, and Lady Manners, who shared the causeuse with the peeress, the benefit of her views on the subject of the education of "the people." "The great object should be to level," she said droningly, fanning herself with her huge fan as she spoke, till the monotonous tones and the monotonous movement made little Mrs. Brown—who had been up very early that morning to get on with her parish work, that she might spare the evening—feel drowsy and long to rub her eyes. "If we were sternly to repress innovations—encroachments upon high ground where the lower classes are out of their element, so to say, and therefore imbued with ideas for which their intelligences are unpreparedwe should be keeping them to the equable calm which is the proper frame of mind for the pursuit of manual and mechanical labour; we should, my dear Mrs. Brown, be striking at the root of this terrible spirit which is making havoc in our Conservative England."

Thea crept away to the window-seat. Outside, a silvery haze veiled the grass, and the trees stood, grand, motionless giants of vegetation striking black shadows. A faint night wind went sighing past, casting in odours of the magnolia blossom that grew against the old wall, as it stirred the fair curls lying on her white dress and the fringe of the heavy window-curtain. As she glanced towards the gloomy distance, where the shrubberies lay in the black silence, a strange, weird cry echoed, as of some bird or creature in distress: then there was a dead silence as if Nature held her breath. She shivered and looked within. The flaming, flickering wax-lights failed to light the vast, lofty room. The

ladies, with their talk and movement, were a tiny oasis in the desert of dimness. Thea felt a strange oppression, as one full of life among the dead—a longing to cast off these surroundings, as a bursting butterfly his chrysalis shell, as a rising soul its cerements—to be what she knew to be herself, even more fully than she had ever been.

Steps in the corridor, more lights—the footmen with coffee-trays—then voices, and the entrance of the gentlemen. Thea watched the groom of the chambers opening the big pianoforte and placing shaded lamps upon the desk, and Sir Robert inspecting the arrangement and, after consulting with Herr Vogel, ordering some alteration, as if she were in a dream. She seemed almost to know that presently the baronet would—as he did—turn round, rap his stick sharply upon the floor, as was his habit when in an earnest mood, and peering around, say, "Where is Miss Biron?"

As Lady Manners put up her eye-glass to

look for "the child," Thea glided forward and went across to the piano. Her father was close by, his back towards her, helping himself to coffee, and Mr. Clifford had gone across to the corner where his cousin was lolling upon a sofa, as Sir Robert introduced her to "Herr Vogel, the well-known musician—who will, I feel convinced," he added with emphasis, "share in my appreciation of your great gifts, my dear, when once he has heard you sing."

"Certainly, certainly," said Vogel. When in doubt, he always twisted that obstinately short and bristling little moustache. At present he was in doubt as to his right "tack" in regard to Thea, so he lowered his eyelids and twisted his moustache with the hand that wore his best diamond ring.

If Vogel had ever had any feeling, it had been beaten out of him by his father when he was a lad. This father, a musician, had brought up his son to "the profession" because it was "sheap," as he

called it in his broken English; "and den you earn your living young," he would tell the sulky lad, whose proclivities were shopwards, and who would rather have been an errand-boy than forced to practise scales on the jingling old square piano for hours daily. Young Adolph, naturally of a mean disposition, soon learnt the doctrine of expediency—learnt to lie in manner as well as in speech, and laid a famous foundation for worming his way to the front in after He practised the respectful deference he now kept for patrons and men of influence upon his father, and "found it answer." Vogel was a man of many manners, and when he was introduced to a stranger, he at once looked him or her overas a purchaser might turn over goods before selection—to appraise the actual value of such strangers to himself, Vogel. the suitable demeanour was thrown over the natural Vogel—if indeed there were any natural Vogel left—like a veil. humility for a great man or a great lady,

with suspicions of compliment, and pretty sayings (the more incomprehensible the better) on the subject of art. A sort of frank bonhomie, smiling good-humour, and readiness to oblige, for one less lofty, especially for clever or sharp subjects, who would "see through" the compliments and pretty sayings. For those who had not made such brisk use of the ladder of their wits as he had himself, but who might possibly outstrip him in the future by their natural ability, he had a joking, "hail-fellow-well-met" air, and would by a word of good counsel or a well-meant hint show how disinterested and how truly their friend he was; for, he thought, were their interests and his to clash by-and-by, it would be as well for them to say, "That Vogel is really a good fellow, though he hasn't much in him." When Vogel was puzzled as to Thea's possibilities for himself, his choice lay between treating her with the lofty indifference he kept for "intruders"—those who were "in the way"

or who were "boring" any one present he was trying to please—or with the friendly patronage above mentioned. As he was turning over Miss Biron's music, of which a pile lay on the piano, it struck him that here there might be a pupil. Sir Robert seemed deeply interested, quite enthusiastic; she was a pretty girl; there might be money in it. His rôle was decided. He turned to Althea with a bland smile.

"You seem to like classical music," he said; "I see Handel, Bach, Mendelssohn"——

"What are you going to sing, my dear?" asked Sir Robert, anxiously, peering at the various titles of the old pieces, brown and indistinct with age—for they had belonged to Thea's mother. "Don't begin with anything dull. You know I want you to make a great impression upon them all at once, as you did upon me. There is so much in a first impression."

- "I will sing 'Charlie is my Darling' if you like," said Thea.
- "No, no; perhaps it would be better to sing one of your classical bits. I am an old man, and a simple ballad pleases me, but Lord Belmont and my cousin Clifford are such connoisseurs, you know." The old gentleman was quite nervously interested. But Thea's timidity and discomfort had vanished, since she sat and looked out into the night.
- "I had better sing this," she said, showing Vogel an old copy of Handel's beautiful "Angels ever bright and fair," which he has given to the to-be-martyred Theodora in prison; and she placed it on the desk.

Lord Belmont was sitting by Doctor Biron, who was trying to "talk" the peer "over" on the subject of his child. Lord Belmont assented with an unpromising little grunt now and then, but all the while he was thinking how he hated these lusus natura. "And of course she is one," he thought. "It is utter absurdity to suppose

a girl absolutely untrained can sing such music as that." The ladies had ceased their talk, and sat awaiting the song. Only Lady Maud kept up a chatter of nothings to Clifford. She had seemed suddenly to awaken when he came to her. As a rule, Maud did not trouble to exert herself to be agreeable to any one. But she had resented the introduction of "those common people," as she considered Doctor Biron and Thea, and if she could spoil the effect of the girl's singing, she would.

But the slender white figure, and something in Thea's pose, struck Clifford as unusual. He abruptly rose, and going across, seated himself in the shadow exactly opposite to her.

The chords of the "symphony" came twanging out from the worn old instrument, and Thea stood, a white figure in the lamp-light, still as a statue, her head bent, her face grave, unfathomable. Then there was a slight pause. Vogel looked up inquiringly—it was time for her to

begin. A slightly supercilious smile died upon his lips as the girl, evidently under the influence of some strong emotion, pointed to the first bar and said, "Please play it again." Almost mechanically, under the sway of an intensity he felt though he could not understand, he recommenced, and there was a subdued gravity about the chords—which before had jerked out somewhat jauntily—that impressed itself upon the listeners.

Thea's first few notes seemed to soar into the air, clear, pure; her audience felt as those in some silent church, if a sweet boy-voice had suddenly launched into an anthem.

And Althea herself? She, with a passionate reverence, had identified herself with Theodora the martyr. She felt no longer there, in that old Tudor mansion, singing to please a few ordinary mortals. Dank, reeking prison walls closed her in; a huge iron door, with clamps and studs of rusty iron, lay between her and the furnace that

shone through the cranks and cranniesthe leaping fire which, yearning to consume her tender body, gloated in anticipatory ruddiness over her lifted face. was Theodora—the once bright, lovely child, who mourned over sorrow and shrank in horror and terror from cruelty; who, amazed and bewildered at the madness of self-seeking, self-loving creatures, wondering how human beings, the breath of God, could grovel in a worse than animal bestiality—for they knew, and the poor brutes knew not-had cast herself before the Almighty in despair, and had been permitted a glimpse of the awful, holy love that broods over each human soul; who had agonized in that mighty tenderness, for remorse that she had been so hard, unknowing, callous—had yearned with a very corrosive yearning which wore out mind and body, to return, if ever so little, that Infinite Love, and had suddenly seen the chance of flying back through God's creature, physical fire, to her home,

her one Parent; who looked upon the advancing executioners, with their cruel, savage faces, their arms loaded with ropes to bind her, as kind brothers, come to unlock the door to set her free; who welcomed the glare that fell full upon her from the hungry flames as a very sunbeam from the heavenly throne; who, led out, heard emancipation in the wild shouts of the crowd, felt freedom as the tight thongs strapped her to the stake, prayed blessings upon the fire that scorching licked her into that they call death with its annihilating tongues.

For had she not known—felt—the love of God?

The tones that streamed from Althea's lips had a strange effect upon her hearers. Lady Manners wept at hearing that "little pet" singing with "such really religious feeling." Mrs. Brown felt dimly that Althea's voice was a comfort to her; it seemed somehow to suggest that her hardworking, apparently thankless life was

under Heaven, after all. In that blaze of fervour, too, she felt somewhat shamed at having in her innermost secret thoughts considered herself as a social martyr because the poor and sick were ungrateful and avaricious. Lady Belmont folded her arms, and felt satisfied with herself and with the world in general. Lord Belmont was startled and excited, he hardly knew why. Vogel, mentally deaf to emotional appeals as the traditional adder, concluded from past experience that here was "unusual talent." Doctor Biron, in the midst of his eager watching of his daughter's audience, succumbed like the rest, and as Althea went on, grew grave; his head sank on his breast, and before this holy enthusiasm, strange doubts grew up in his mind as to whether all was quite right with him.

And Clifford? Under his stoical demeanour there was an impressionable nature, and as the girl sang the air he well knew, each note of it—an air that he had heard rendered by the greatest artists and

which had failed to touch him—he quailed. Each phrase seemed to draw out some secret of the past which he had buried in his memory. Some shadow of the one tenderness of his youth, his mother, seemed there, floating towards him with extended arms and sad, reproachful eyes; his village love, who had died-a sad recollection which sometimes, though very rarely, rose to the surface in a disturbed dream—came to his mind, lying still and white as he saw her in her coffin,—a sight which had hardened and sent him forth brutalized rather than He rose from his chair and softened. almost unconsciously leant up against the wall, and when the song was over, he went up to the girl, quieted and rested by her lofty identification, and said somewhat abruptly-

"I should like to say something to you of what I think, but I scarcely know what to say."

"That is great praise from Cousin Clifford," said smiling, gratified Sir Robert, patting her shoulder. "My dear child, if you only knew, he is generally hard as the nether millstone, cold as ice. I confess, though, that while your Royalist ballad moved me, this is greater, far greater. Gentlemen and ladies, where is your applause?"

"I think we feel as if we were in church, my dear," said Lady Manners, coming towards the group, wiping her eyes, and slapping the little King Charles, who yelped because he had been suddenly roused from a comfortable nap on her satin skirt. "You see, one doesn't applaud in church, does one?—My dear little Althea, you have quite astonished me; you have indeed."

"It is, in fact, a great talent," said Vogel, joining the group, bowing and smiling and assuming a foreign accent—a habit when "on business"—"it should not be lost. Of course you intend to devote your life to art, Miss Biron? Which will you select—the concert-room or the stage?"

"What?" said Althea, crossing her arms behind her, and leaning against the piano, pale as her white gown. "What do you say?" She awaited his next words with wide-open eyes and parted lips.

Vogel, already primed with castles in the air as to a possible pupil whose instruction would be well paid for, painted a vivid sketch of a career. "With your capabilities, a few months' study will work wonders. Then you must travel, just for a short time; come out, say, in Paris; make a great success, then appear in London."

"Vogel seems to guarantee success," languidly observed Clifford, watching Althea, who seemed in a dream, while various expressions flitted across her face, the shadows of passing, disturbing thoughts. "From what I have seen of artists' careers, I should hesitate to advise any one to launch upon so perilous a sea as the sea of public favour."

"Nonsense!" said Lord Belmont, warmly.

"We want fresh blood—youth, fervour; there is always room for inspiration. It seems to me that of late there has been a dead level of mediocrity."

"What does Dr. Biron say?" asked Lady Manners, who, piecing the present conversation with Thea's confessions as to her promiscuous reading, felt somewhat anxious on the subject of her "little pet." "I should think that he is the person to be consulted."

"I bow before superior wisdom," laughed the doctor, the old "Harry Biron" careless vanity suddenly resuscitated. "Of course I know nothing of these matters, buried in the country; equally, of course, I know my daughter's gifts."

"It seems to me that we are discussing my young friend's affairs somewhat unpardonably," interrupted the vicar. He disliked music, and had been lulled into a sleepy mood by the serious song. "Althea, my dear, what have you to say in the matter?" "I don't know, Mr. Brown; I must think."

"The girl has some sense in her, after all," thought Clifford.

Then Lady Belmont called out, asking, what it was all about; and the beautiful Maud, who had been audibly yawning, asked what time it was.

Mrs. Brown rose and took leave of her hostess, and the conversation was somewhat abruptly ended by a general move.

"If you really intend to consider the idea of artist-life, Miss Biron," said Clifford, as he helped Thea to adjust her wraps in the hall, "might I give you the benefit of my experiences? You know 'all is not gold that glitters.'"

"I never thought it was," said Thea, with a flash of something like indignation. "But is pleasure to be the end of our lives? Who would ever achieve anything who only wanted to be happy? Is happiness possible?" Then, feeling she had said too much, she blushed.

Clifford smiled. "I admire your enthusiasm," he said. "At the same time, you must not be its victim. Will you let me talk the matter over with you? Will you let me come and see you?" (This more warmly; the words were uttered before he knew what he was going to say.)

Thea glanced up with surprise. She had almost forgotten her half-repugnance to this cold, handsome man; but the idea of a lengthy conversation with him, perhaps alone, seemed to recall the shrinking sensation.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, with the distrustful gesture of a timid child.

Then Dr. Biron called out to her to make haste, as he stood in the doorway; indeed, his restless little grey mare was pawing the gravel and snorting in an ominous manner. So that in a few minutes Thea was driving through the park at her father's side under the starlight, without having said nay to a "morning call" from this man she had begun by disliking.

"The girl is pretty, peculiar, clever, and has a queer charm about her that is individual—belongs to herself," mused Clifford, as he lit a cigar and paced the gravelled drive just under the wall where grew the magnolia tree. "Pah! that disgusting He turned, and saw the lamps scent!" of the doctor's chaise twinkling like sparks, as the mare trotted rapidly away between the huge trunks of the trees in the great " And certain avenue. to \mathbf{a} extent mannerism in a human being is like a powerful odour. It may attract some, but it repels others. Whatever that girl does will be flavoured with her identity. not leave her where she is? earth induced me to think of mixing myself up in her affairs I don't know; however, I need not, if I don't choose."

Clifford believed in himself, in his own impulses. That they could lead him wrong had never occurred to him. This blind faith made his life very easy to him, and he never troubled about deciding, if doubt-

ful as to his actions. He waited for the inspiration of the moment, and followed it. "Perhaps I will see her again, and perhaps not," he thought, placidly smoking. Meanwhile, he was re-contemplating in imagination Althea in her white dress with the rapt ecstasy upon her upturned "There is no reason to forget a face. poetical impression," he said to himself. "Life is not so agreeable that you can afford not to 'chew the cud' of everything pleasant and agreeable." Indeed, the Honourable John Clifford prided himself upon being an epicure, mentally and physically.

Althea, hearing that her mother was asleep, kissed the doctor hastily, and escaped to her own room, where she sat at the window, gazing out into the darkness, and professedly wondering what she would do. But somehow or another, her thoughts revolved around one centre—Clifford. She saw him, heard his voice, felt the strange "creepy" shrinking. "Was it because he

is a bad man?" she asked herself. She could not understand why she should experience so acute a sensation from the presence of a stranger. "I hope I shall get him out of my mind to-morrow," she said; "it would be horrid to have one's thoughts haunted by some one like this."

Then she went to bed, and dreamt she was walking in a strange garden in the twilight, where she was in a maze of tall yew hedges, one thicker than the last; and after wandering fearfully for hours, and feeling hopelessly lost, she suddenly came upon the open centre, where there was a marble statue. Going towards it, she saw it was the statue of Clifford; but there were eyes in the head that moved and fixed themselves upon her. In terror she tried to rush away, but she could neither move nor speak; then the statue slowly raised its marble arm, and, with a sneer upon its white face, and cold cruelty in the hard eyes, struck her to the ground.

With a struggle she awoke, her heart

beating, to realize that she had had a horrible dream. "But see him again I won't," she determined. "I heard them say something about returning to town in a few days. I shall stay in till they have gone; at all events, till he is gone. This is a warning—it must be; I must never see that man again, as long as I live."

CHAPTER III.

AWAKENING.

AFTER Thea's disturbed dream she awoke. and remained awake till the grey dawn, when, amid the twitterings of the birds and the faint soothing promises of cheery daylight, she fell into a tranquil slumber. The sun shone broadly into the room, the air seemed full of life, when she suddenly sprang up in bed to find that it was nine The dogs were barking, the doves o'clock. were cooing, the parrot was screaming shrilly, and she heard her father's voice and his step in the narrow passage down-The dream was forgotten. With stairs. the sensation of life came a rush of feeling. As the young girl sat up and tossed back her hair, she realized that something had happened; there had been a change. The old life was shut away; veils, barriers were thrown down; before her lay a whole magnificent panorama—her newly discovered world, the possible future.

She dressed hastily and went downstairs. Dr. Biron, his blue eyes shining with satisfaction, his white hair almost bristling with gratified vanity, was enjoying his breakfast.

"Give your old father a kiss," he said, wiping his mouth with his table-napkin; "and now go and sit down, and eat something. You know you won't have strength to do all they expect you to do, Bob" (his old pet name for his child), "if you don't eat. Ah! I think we succeeded in astonishing them, Bob, didn't we, eh?"

Dr. Biron had had sanguine dreams. During the night he had visited vast operahouses, filled to overflowing with the great and magnificent; he had seen Althea, a dazzling speck upon the wide stage, literally pelted with bouquets and laurel

wreaths; he had stood by while the horses were unharnessed, and the "gilded youth" of the city had dragged the carriage, containing this precious child of his, to her home; and, when awakened, he had said to himself, "Just what I expected ever since she was born"—a sentiment which he repeated to Thea. ." You know, my dear, I was not in the least astonished at the effect you produced on those strait-laced people last night," he declared. "It is merely an earnest of what will follow when you really come out."

Then he intended—he meant—to take their hints. "What do you mean, papa?" she asked, almost breathlessly.

"My dear, do you think I won't give you every advantage you could have if you were the daughter of the highest of the land? I would slave my fingers to the bone rather than that your talent should be lost to the world. You must have the best instruction, the very best. That will make you independent. You

would not be my child if you didn't wish to be that, Thea! Look at me; look what prospects I had, and how I sunk them all, and came and hid myself in this hole, just because I was too proud to owe any man a penny; and where I have made hundreds, you will make thousands."

"Then you need not work when you are old, papa." Thea's eyes glistened. Already she saw herself in a splendid carriage, her father, aged, decrepit, by her side, she occupied in tending him.

"My dear, as if I would be a pensioner on any one's bounty, least of all my daughter's! No; don't you trouble your head about me. I shall work till I can work no longer, and then there is the practice. Any one will pay me an annuity upon that, which will bring in enough to keep your mother and me. No! It is for you I think—for you to be independent, queen of them all. But you had better say nothing of this to your mother, Thea; she is so simple—has never been in the world, you know."

- "I don't suppose mother would like the idea of my going on to the stage," said Thea, her eyes dreamily fixed on the white arums in the bay window.
- "No; nor that idiot Jack, either," said the doctor, irritably.
- "Don't say anything against Jack, papa," said Thea, warmly. "No one knows how good he has been to me."
- "He has been audacious enough, if that is what you mean. However, all that is child's play, nonsense, past and done with. It amused you, or I should pretty soon have put a stop to it, I can tell you. But mind, Thea, no word to that young fool about your future. I don't intend any one to interfere with that."
- "Why isn't mother down?" asked Thea, changing the subject.

Dr. Biron explained that she had a headache. "So I sent up her breakfast," he added. "To tell you the truth, Bob, I won't have any one interfering with your prospects, and I was glad of an opportunity you. I.

to tell you so. I believe that there is that young fool," he said, as horse's hoofs resounded in the stable-yard. "Now, you understand—not one word."

Thea followed him into the passage, and smiled at the advancing Jack over his shoulder.

"How do?" said the doctor gruffly to the young man, and went out. "It always goes against me to leave those two alone," he thought, as he got into his gig and started for his first "round." "It is a perfect mercy that these people have put new ideas into Thea's head. No fear that that booby won't soon be effectually cut out."

Jack was paler than he was wont to be; and that he had taken more pains than usual with his toilette did not escape the observant eyes of his lady-love, with whom such signs of anxiety, if anything, placed him at a disadvantage. He did not take off his carefully-buttoned dog-skin gloves, but merely laid his riding-whip on the

sideboard, and tossed his hair from his troubled forehead.

- "My father asked me to ride down and see how they were getting on with the new park fence," he said awkwardly; "so I thought, as it was on my way, I might as well call in and ask you how it had all gone off."
- "Gone off? You talk as if you were speaking of a gun," said Thea, laughing.
- "You know what I mean, Thea. I want to know how you enjoyed yourself—what they thought of your singing." His voice was hoarse; it cost him much to probe the topic.
- "Thought of my singing?" said Thea, meditatively, picking up little Snap, the Skye terrier, and twining her long fingers among his tangled locks. "Let me see; I must try and remember. Well, Lady Maud seemed bored, and as soon as I had done, asked what time it was; Lady Manners said something complimentary about her 'little pet'—she doesn't think

half as much of me as she does of that little spaniel Charlie, though; then Mrs. Brown said it was late, and looked dreadfully sleepy; and the great countess said nothing at all."

"I don't want to hear what the old women said," said Jack. "Don't fence and be deceitful, Thea. Tell me what the men said;" and he looked like a snarling terrier.

"I believe this dear old Jack is actually jealous," said Thea, caressingly, and she threw her arms round him and laid her head on the shoulder of his rough coat. "Well, if you want to know what the men said, they talked about my being an artist; they advised papa to bring me out——"

Jack pushed her away almost rudely, went to the mantelpiece, leant his arms thereupon, and bent his head down. His worst fears were suddenly, cruelly realized. At those words, his heart had seemed to stand still.

"What is the matter?" asked Thea, somewhat coldly. She was piqued.

- "Do you ask your dog what is the matter if you kick him, or your horse when you lash him?" He raised his face, and, distorted with emotion, his plain lineaments certainly looked their worst.
- "I cannot see the application," said Thea. "And I think it is very strange, to say the least, that at such an eventful time of my life you do not sympathize with me."
- "Sympathize with your being insulted?"
- "If you talk in that absurd manner, Jack, you had better go." Her eyes were flashing now.
- "Very well." He took up his hat, crowded it down over his eyes, and made for the door.
- "Jack!" His rage, furious to the length of leaving her, was subsiding. "Come here." Then, as he turned, hesitating, she met him halfway, and gently pulling him, coaxed him to sit by her on the sofa.
 - "Jack, the most complimentary thing to

say of you at this moment is, that you are a silly—old—booby."

"I told you they were degrading you to a mountebank!" cried the young man, with tears in his eyes, seizing his love and holding her close. "I warned you they wanted you to amuse them—to be a Heavens! to think that Dr. pastime. Biron should have allowed it! But, not contented with that, they are doing worse; they are tempting you to lower yourself to become that higher sort of gipsy they call a musician, an 'artist.' I prefer a gipsy, because he acknowledges he is what he is, that he pitches his tent where food is plentiful; but an artist is a gipsy under false pretences—he pretends to some lofty sentiment, and all the time he is looking out where he may best feather his nest. Don't they all travel, and merely stay where it will pay them to stay? Do they cling to their country, to their people, to their creed? Are they even as clannish as the wandering gipsies-?"

- "Jack, you must say no more;" and Thea's hand was over his mouth. "You are—well, ignorant, or I wouldn't forgive you so easily."
- "I will not let you be dragged down without a struggle," said Jack, springing up. "So far, thank God, I have the right to protest——"
- "You will have to go," said Thea. "There's mother coming down. She is not well, and I won't have her made worse by the sight of your face, which—— Oh, Jack, you don't know how ugly you look when you are cross!"
- "I will go now," said Jack, with subdued fierceness, "because I said I would be with those carpenters at ten o'clock; but I shall come again later, Thea. If you think I shall let the matter rest here, you are very much mistaken."
- "Was that Jack?" said languid Mrs. Biron, entering as he cantered down the yard. "Oh, Thea, dear, the breakfast not cleared away, and it is nearly ten o'clock!"

Althea welcomed a distraction to her mother's thoughts. After Jack's turmoil, she was scarcely ready to encounter another conflicting opinion. In answer to Mrs. Biron's inquiries, she gave a matter-of-fact account of the dinner-party, dwelling rather upon the scraps of conversation she had heard than upon her share in the evening's events; and when her mother asked, with a shade of anxiety, how she thought they had liked her singing, she merely said, "Well, I fancy I chose too serious a song for them, mother dear," then changed the conversation.

It was one of those glowing summer mornings when there seems passion in the very sunbeams that cast themselves down upon the dewy, drooping blossoms; when there is an abandonment, an anarchy in nature, the soft air fanning the warm roses that lavish their perfumes spreading open the very fount of their close-shut centres; the trees drooping their branches to the earth, the plants rearing themselves

towards the trees, the fruit reddening fragrantly among the leaves, and the insects buzzing aimlessly, drunken with the atmosphere, overladen as it is with odour and warmth. A morning in which can work," when youth, " no man strength, passion leap up with a hot cry for pleasure—a licence to enjoy this air, to bask in the sunbeams, to crush out the beauties around, and to possess them, if in the very crushing the beauty dies, as died the snakes strangled in the strong fingers of the infant Hercules. There is always a certain savageness in the impulses of nature, a lack of sympathy for anything but the moment. "Give me the moment, and all it can provide," cries natural self. And as the Honourable John Stuart Clifford strolled out into the sunshine after breakfast, and stood upon the dewy grass, the scented breezes playing with his hair, he felt the cry "up and away" start his pulses and quicken his being, and the longing to enjoy this fulness of summer overpower his ordinary indifference. But what to do? Ride through this still beauty on a panting, reeking horse? Lie in the shade and dream? There is a suppressed activity in nature on a day like this that excites rather than lulls. He thought he would ask his cousin Maud to take a walk with him. Accordingly, he sought her in the morning-room, that wainscoted chamber hung with Vandykes, where the stained glass windows overlooked the rose garden, and by one of which, now thrown open, she sate on a low chair with her knitting. But she said, "What an idea! To go out in this sun! Why, I should never get my skin right again," and said she would play billiards with him if he liked. But he, retorting almost with warmth that it was "a sin to be indoors such a morning as this," left her, to seek another playmate -she looking after him, wondering what new hobby Clifford was after now.

Utterly unconscious was she that with

her half a dozen little words—a careless refusal seemingly of no moment—she had forged a chain that would gall and torment herself and others till the end of time.

Had she said "Yes," and gone out with Clifford, the destinies of many might have been other than they were. Thus do lives sometimes seem to hang upon a careless moment, upon a trivial word.

As it was, Clifford stood in the sunshine, his hat slouched over his eyes, thinking what a fool she was not to care for the beautiful morning (or rather for a stroll with him) because she was afraid to get her precious complexion a little sunburnt. "The vanity of women is simply disgusting," he said, and wondered what he should do, and where he should go. At least, he believed he wondered. In reality he knew that he would presently find himself at Dr. Biron's cottage; and as he looked uncertainly first in one direction, then in another, he was actually seeking a short cut to the doctor's house, which

he remembered having seen when he paid a short visit to Elfield years ago.

Half reluctantly, half annoyed with himself for he hardly knew what, he strolled across the grass, his hands in his pockets. "Well, if anything comes of it, it will be her fault," he mused (alluding to Maud). "Though why anything should come of it, goodness knows; only somehow I feel it would be better to keep clear of that girl and her affairs. I can't tell her she isn't a born artist, for she is; and I know very well what the effect of the least admission on my part will be: she will fly off at a tangent—be off into the pro-Really, some women are like fession. loaded guns: a word is a match—say it, and they explode. I don't want to be the one to get the poor little thing into trouble, and saddle her with the heavy harness of such a life." He stopped and considered; there was time to turn back. He glanced behind him at the great red pile, already growing smaller in the distance. Go back to Maud, to billiards, and to the cringing sycophancy of "that fellow Vogel," who was always after him like a dog? (His uncle Belmont never got up till two, so he would have to bear the brunt of "the little Jew.") The recollection of Vogel made him think of last night. "I could see he had some idea in his scheming little head about the girl," he thought. "Nothing would be easier than for him to communicate with her. Of course he She ought to will. What a fool I am! be warned. She is not woman of the world enough to be a match for Vogel."

Satisfied with this reasoning, he determined to call at Dr. Biron's at once. He was now at a park gate. Before him was a gravelled road, leading through fields; at one side were the shrubberies. Beyond, he could catch sight of the roofs of the village houses above the hedge and between the trees, and the vane on the church steeple was a bright speck in the sunshine. "I remember something about these fields

leading to a lane, and a lane to the village," he reflected. "But here comes a native; I will ask."

The native was a young man on horse-back, who had pushed open the gate at the other end of the field, and backed his horse to shut it; but instead of riding down the drive, he trotted across the grass to a corner where some men were at work at the park fence. It was Jack.

Clifford strolled onwards; and when he was nearing the group of workmen, Jack turned and rode along the field towards him. At that moment something shining among the turnips caught Clifford's eye, and he stepped aside and picked up a tiny locket, battered and discoloured. He opened it. The glass was unbroken; under it lay, snugly and untouched, a round curl of soft fair hair.

Jack cantered up, and drew rein at a sign from Clifford. "What a cross-looking young fellow! The locket can scarcely be his property," he thought, as he raised his hat and asked the nearest way to the village.

"What part of the village?" asked Jack, scowling. He knew he was speaking to the élégant, the "lady-killer," Clifford. "The village has two ends, I believe. I suppose you don't want to go to both at once." Then he turned furiously red; he caught sight of his locket in Clifford's hand. "That belongs to me," he said, involuntarily stretching out his hand. Thea's gift seemed to him desecrated by the man's touch.

"I am pleased to be able to restore it to you," said Clifford, somewhat ironically. "Perhaps in return you can kindly tell me the nearest way to Dr. Biron's."

As soon as Jack had quieted his horse, which started and plunged as his rider's spur touched him when Clifford spoke, he replied, "You are coming the wrong way. You will have to cross the park, and get into the lane yonder. It is a good mile. But you won't find the doctor at home. He is always out."

"Thank you," said Clifford, raising his hat; and Jack rode on, comforted as he looked back to see him continuing the same road.

"I shall be able to leave the message at the Hall, and get back to Thea before he reaches the cottage that way," he congratulated himself.

When Clifford reached the gate by which Jack had entered the field, a sudden thought made him turn back and look at the young horseman. He had seemed marvellously nettled at his asking the way to Dr. Biron's. Then the locket, that soft fair curl, the same colour as Althea's hair. "Oh, impossible!" he said to himself. "Ridiculous—that young boor and that lovely, gifted creature!" Then he called out to one of the workmen, and asked the nearest way to the doctor's house.

An old carpenter stayed hammering, and, pushing up his cap, scratched his grey head, as if to summon his wits to the surface from some inner retreat where they slumbered when not in active use. "Well, measter, if yer don't mind a fence and a gap in the hedge, if yer cross you turnip-field and keep straight along under the hedge to the right, ye'll come to the doctor's field where he grows his wegetables, and there's a path that'll take yer right to the top of the garden; yer can't miss it."

"Thanks," said Clifford, mechanically touching his hat. He hesitated. It was scarcely the thing to do—to creep into the doctor's garden by a back way. Still, he was directed thus as a matter of course. Country and town manners were different. No doubt many visitors took that short cut, or there would be no worn path across the turnip field, no gaps in the hedges. others-for instance, his polite young friend on horseback—availed themselves of such privileges, why not he, Clifford? boldly took the old carpenter's hint, and in a few minutes stood in the doctor's field, on the path, at the end of which was the 10 VOL. I.

tarred fence, the row of walnut and pear trees, and the green garden gate.

Towards this he walked slowly, with some misgiving in his mind. What a leafy, pleasant garden lay behind the gate! Between the tall fruit trees he could see the gabled roof of the cottage, the weathercock on the stables, the dovecote, and the white fluttering pigeons. As he stopped short a few paces from the gate, still hesitating, he heard their soft cooing; then another sound arose, a clear pure voice singing. He started guiltily, and wished himself anywhere—looked round for concealment; but it was too late. A quick footstep, the flutter of a dress—he was face to face with Thea.

She gave a short cry. "Oh, Jack—"
"How you startled me," she was going to
say; but the words died on her lips as she
saw a stranger. She did not recognize
Clifford at first in his grey morning suit,
with his hat tilted over his eyes; but when
he lifted it, and began, "I really must

apologize, Miss Biron," she retreated a step, and her heart seemed to stop.

"I did not know you; I thought it was Jack," she said, staring at him with a peculiar expression.

"I am very sorry I am not Jack," he said, smiling, wondering at that searching, half-frightened, half-disgusted expression. Could she have heard something to "set her against him," or was she shocked at his manner of appearing? "I really am very sorry to have mistaken my way, but I was misdirected," he explained.

"Do you want to come in?" asked Althea, distantly.

Evidently she did not want his company, now and thus. He felt inclined to salute her and depart the way he came; but she looked so sweet and young as she stood there in her green-and-white muslin dress, a wide straw hat shading her delicate face, so like some graceful pale flower—was it not the white convolvulus?—that he was more attracted than had she flown to meet him with a torrent of welcome.

"Not unless you wish it, of course," he said. "I will return the way I came, and call upon Mrs. Biron some other day. Let us hope I shall be better directed next time." Then he ventured a chance shot. "I hardly regret my little walk, however," he continued meaningly. "For it has not only given me a lesson in scrambling through hedges and leaping ditches, but it enabled me to restore a lost trinket to its owner."

"You found my locket—Jack's locket? Oh, I am glad!"

"I thought the fellow looked a 'Jack,'" was Clifford's reflection. "Oh, women, women!" (as he watched the colour rise to Althea's brightening face). "Dress up a broomstick!"

"Then Jack told you the way, of course. Will you come in? I will take you into the house, if you don't mind, Mr. Clifford;" and Thea unlatched the gate.

Clifford walked in, at once elated and disgusted.

She had hastened to lift the latch with a curious throb of pleasure. Why she felt it, she hardly knew. Perhaps it was because, since her talk with her father, she had been agitated with great thoughts of her future, and welcomed the first help to their fulfilment in the person of Clifford, who looked so different to the Clifford of her dream, so different to the cold, hard Clifford of yesterday, that she could scarcely reconcile herself that they were one and the same.

He spoke hesitatingly, with deference; indeed, Clifford felt hesitation, a strange sense of shame, as if he were hardly honourable coming thus to a man's house, even though that man might be the village doctor. Before he stepped into the garden, he glanced back almost regretfully; and when he had, as it were, passed the Rubicon, he looked awkward and embarrassed.

"Not that way," said Thea, for he was looking towards the flower-garden, where the hammock was slung under the trees. "This is the way to the house."

The word recalled him to himself. Until now his ideas had been vague, dreamy. He had sought this girl, how, why, and wherefore he had not considered. He had felt some shadowy notion that they could talk together there in the garden; conventionalities had not occurred to him. Now he suddenly remembered that, although he had begun this visit unceremoniously, to continue it in the same fashion would be almost an insult.

"Papa is out," said Thea, as they walked down the broad gravel walk; "but if you will come into the drawing-room, I will tell my mother you are here. Only you won't say anything about—about my being an artist—to her, will you?"

Clifford wondered what on earth he should talk to the old lady about, as he fixed his eyes on Thea's face, now suffused with colour. Then he saw his way to having his anticipated talk in the rural garden, undisturbed. "Then how am I to discuss the matter with you?" he asked.

"You know I came to tell you what I knew on the subject. I felt I ought; it was simply a duty I had to perform." As he spoke, he believed his own words, and was himself, Clifford, again. He stood still, and glanced at his watch. "Perhaps you could spare me a few minutes here?" he said, politely, as if he were a solicitor interviewing a client.

"Let us walk back to the gate," said Thea, glancing towards the house. She grew nervous as his manner became stiff and cool. "I would rather know all you have to tell me at once."

"You are somewhat impulsive, Miss Biron, I am afraid," he said, with his cold smile. "You must allow me to warn you against the tendency. It does not do in the world. I fancied you were impulsive last night, when you were so suddenly moved by Vogel's speech."

"I don't like that man," said Thea. "He does not mean what he says."

"There you are right to a certain extent,

Miss Biron. I cannot say I particularly like little Vogel. He is not sincere. Still, if you come to that, who is? I am sorry to say it would not do to speak the truth in society; and as poor Vogel lives by society, depends upon society for his bread, it would be unreasonable to expect him to quarrel with it. He is no worse than the rest—artists, I mean. You see, to love art and to live by art are two different things."

"Do you mean to say that one cannot be an artist and speak the truth?" asked Thea, stopping short, her eyes large with indignation.

"Not at all," said Clifford, amused. "I meant that we should not expect artists to be more truthful than their neighbours."

"I always speak the truth; at least, I always mean to."

"I do not doubt it, Miss Biron. But it occurs to me that if you had spoken the truth when we met at this gate a few minutes ago, you would have told me that you thought me—well, at the very least,

rude and intrusive; now, would you not?"

- "Well"—she hesitated—"not exactly. Of course I was surprised to see you; at least, at first."
- "Then, on second thoughts, you were not surprised; how is that?"
- "I don't"—she began; then, remembering her boasted truthfulness, stopped short. "I don't see why I should say," she said resolutely. "That is not what we had to talk about. Besides, I am not quite sure that I know why I wasn't exactly surprised to see you." She glanced at him with a shy, almost fearful look. He was looking at her earnestly.
- "It is rather important that you should tell me before we proceed any farther," he said. "Come, tell me the truth. You jumped to the conclusion yesterday evening that I was a very unpleasant person, a person sure to misbehave himself if he had the chance. So, after the first surprise, you thought to yourself, 'Just what

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I should have expected from that horrid man.' That was it, was it not?"

- "Not exactly," said Thea.
- "Then you certainly did not form a very good opinion of me at first acquaintance?"
- "I don't form opinions," began Thea, slowly, her eyes bent to the ground, and loosening the gravel with the toe of her shoe. "But I can't say—— Oh, why do you make me say such things?" she cried, with a flash of anger. "I don't want to."
- "My dear Miss Biron, I hope we shall learn to know and to like each other before very long," said Clifford, pitching his voice tenderly. Thea was beginning to interest him, as something new; her "little ways" amused him like the strange gambols of the young of some new creature might have done. "I will not ask you any more unpleasant questions. Will you let me sit down?" He looked towards a garden bench under the walnut-tree. "Then we

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will turn the tables, and you shall ask me as many questions as you like."

The tears of annoyance were in Thea's eyes. She felt worsted, she hardly knew why—as if Clifford could make her say or admit what he pleased. This sort of converse was very different to her talks with Jack. She would not sit on the bench beside him. She clasped her hands behind her, and leant against the trunk of a peartree—the garden path between them—biting her lip with annoyance, because, against her very will, she noticed how white was the brow on which the dark curls lay thick and heavy, how chiselled the beautiful features, how graceful the pose of the long, straight form.

He thought she looked like some unwilling prisoner. But the expression of her face was not unflattering, and he felt she might dislike him now, wild bird that she was. "When she is tamed, things will be different," he mused.

"We were talking about Vogel," he said,

as Thea did not seem inclined to speak; "and although I do not particularly care for him as an individual, Miss Biron, that has nothing to do with his artistic capabilities. Vogel is a clever little fellow—I am sure he would be the very man to train your voice." Clifford had "taken up" Vogel, therefore believed in him on the principle of "I approve, therefore that which I approve must be worthy of approval."

"What is the use of talking about training my voice'?" said Thea, hopelessly. "Papa said this morning he would give me every advantage. But how can I get advantages living here?"

"Then Dr. Biron wishes you to be a singer—I mean, a public singer?"

"Does it surprise you?" asked Thea, more eagerly, for Clifford seemed astonished or incredulous. "Mr. Clifford, tell me the truth—you don't think I am clever enough?"

"I think you are clever enough for any-

thing, Miss Biron. But—pardon me if I speak plainly—it seems a little strange that a father who, like yours, has ample means to give his daughter a pleasant home, and has the entrée to whatever society the neighbourhood affords, should wish, as it were, to exhibit her to the public at so much a head. I see I startle you. I should not say this. Indeed, I forget how little you know of the world. I have not hurt you, have I?"

He spoke kindly, for Thea shrank and winced.

"It is quite true that my father gives me everything that I want," she said huskily; "but there will come a time when he will be old and feeble. He has no son, Mr. Clifford—no one to be his staff, his support. It seemed to me—it came to me like a flash—that perhaps it was meant that I should earn money that he might have a peaceful old age. And singers make a great deal of money, do they not?"

"Sometimes," said Clifford, smiling.
"But before the golden harvest is reaped, golden seed must be sown—I mean that an artist's education costs money. Then there are other difficulties to be surmounted, obstacles to be overcome. The sunrise is magnificent, seen from the top of Mont Blanc, Miss Biron; but to see it, you must encounter fatigue, dangers, perils."

"I am ready for any amount—not only ready, but eager," said the girl, passionately. "What I have endured to keep patient, shut up here! No one knows how I have yearned and panted for something to do, something which would use up all my force—and I have plenty. Why should people have a lot of energy, if it is not to be used? Why should they always feel goaded to do something extraordinary—they can't tell what, till it is shown them—if they are not to do it?" She was flushed; her eyes sparkled.

Clifford assumed a desperate gravity,

lest he should check her expansion. "You are right," he said. "I have no doubt in my own mind that you have a 'call' to the artist world, Miss Biron. Still, you must not deceive yourself with regard to your motive. I would far rather hear you acknowledge that you wish to be a professional singer because of a violent impulse that you can scarcely resist, than hear you propound theories about the old age of parents, etc. No real artist ever became an artist through secondary motives. A vocation is a vocation, potent, irresistible. Now, be true to yourself, and tell me, why do you wish to take flight into the world?"

He leant forward and gazed earnestly at her. His thoughts were of the girl herself. He watched her as a new peculiar specimen of the womankind which was his peculiar idiosyncrasy, as a naturalist might watch a new specimen of beetle. She interpreted his absorption as that of the votary of art, and her eyelids drooped, her

clasped hands trembled, as she sought to obey him.

For half a minute she was silent; then she suddenly raised her eyes, and cried, "It is only for myself, Mr. Clifford; I can see that!" Then, as she met his gaze, she remembered she was not only speaking to a stranger, but to a stranger who had inspired her with distrust. "Do not take any notice of what I am saying," she began in confusion.

But he, reading her thoughts, and triumphant—as those who feel the reins in their hands generally are, rose and interrupted her with, "My dear child, your confidences are sacred so far as I am concerned; and, believe me, I thoroughly understand you, and respect your frankness."

One sharp glance of suspicion, then her face seemed suddenly to kindle, as a window glows alive in a gloomy house front if a blaze of light as suddenly flashes from within; her wild thoughts leapt at him in a torrent of speech. "You think,

perhaps," she began, unconsciously laying her hand on his arm, "that this quiet little garden is to me what it seems to you—a few square plots of ground, with one quiet old tree guarding it here, another as it were on the watch there. Do you know what it really is? It is to me a church-yard, where a hundred lives have lived, have died, have vanished. It is at once their grave and their tombstone."

He stared. Had his sensation been translated, it might have been reduced to an inquiry, "Is she a little mad?"

"You do not understand me," she continued. "Mr. Clifford, haven't you lived a hundred different times, a hundred different ways?"

"I cannot say that I have," he acknowledged. "I fear that I have been too contented with my own life, my own identity. But go on; tell me what you mean."

"I mean that years and years ago, even when I was quite a baby, I did not vol. 1.

seem to be always myself. Something would follow me-a shadow-a thought, it seemed, at first. Then I would feel oppressed with the recollection of some being I had heard of—some other person, perhaps dead, perhaps alive. This memory would haunt and possess me, till it would grow stronger than my poor weak little self; I was within it, as a bird within a nest, and its warmth would almost suffocate me, till it grew to a burning heat which scorched and withered me till it seemed I was part of the thing itself. Sometimes it would be David, or Saul, or Judith, that I heard sermons about; sometimes it would be a character in history, or in Shakespeare, or in some great book I had read. And after I had been, as it were, absorbed into them, I felt their feelings, I suffered their sufferings; and, till I could vent them in words or in song, my tortures were horrible." She paused and turned pale.

"That is what led you to sing?" asked Clifford, gently.

She bowed her head. "Sometimes the identities were consoling, heavenly," she said, "as in Theodora—as in many of those who lived splendid lives and died noble deaths; but—is it a wonder, Mr. Clifford, that I shall welcome an outlet to these awful hours; that I shall think any work or hardship too much that will let these creatures free, when they come into my mind and beat against it, as it were, in their struggle to get out?"

"You are proving to me that you have the highest form of histrionic talent, Miss Biron," said Clifford, warmly. "Do you think I will not help you? You shall ask me nothing in aid of the development of your gifts that I will refuse. But, do you know, I am almost sorry to hear what you tell me. Let me know more of these embodiments. How can you, as it were, be identified with first one, then with another character, opposite in construction, in emotion, in experience?"

"It has always reminded me of the

waves," said Thea, sighing. "I have seemed to myself a poor little shifting shore, and first one great wave has rolled up, has broken, and deluged me, and before it has left me, another, more furious, has burst upon me. My life has not been pleasant, Mr. Clifford. I think I can bear a little struggle, a little work, a little disappointment. Now, do you understand why I was 'suddenly moved,' as you call it, when that little man said I could be an artist? I felt like a wounded soldier in battle when he hears the cry to desist; I felt like a man on the rack when the order is given, 'Stop.'"

- "But perhaps an artistic career would merely add to your mental turmoil, instead of being the outlet you suppose."
 - "I do not think so."
 - "Well, you can but try."
- "But what am I to do?" asked Thea. She felt strangely disturbed. Her emotions seemed to surge, a very mental whirlpool.

He swung his cane and looked around; then, touched by a sense of something almost ludicrous in the idea of a singer, an actress, no matter what her original genius, springing suddenly from among these groves of vegetables, bushes of rustic flowers, from among the farmyards and fields, to assert herself in busy artist life, in great theatres and crowded concert-rooms, he smiled. "Do?" he "Ah! that is the question. repeated. But, in any case, you could scarcely study and 'come out' in Elfield, could you?"

Then, as they walked back again towards the house, he told her how artistic postulants thronged the conservatoires abroad; of the close study pursued in Milan, Leipsic, Paris, and other student centres; of the time spent in "gaining experience" on the boards of small Continental theatres; and of the small fortunes sunk in these processes, until Thea grew aghast.

"Poor papa!" she sighed; "he has no

idea;" and her head drooped, to be raised as Clifford assured her that it was quite possible "all that sort of thing" might not be necessary for her.

"Only you cannot stay here," he added; "you must go to London. You must have lessons every day; and, in spite of our dislike to Vogel, Vogel is the man to put you in the right way."

"But how can papa leave his patients and go to London?"

"There is your mother."

"Oh!" Thea shook her head. "Poor mother! she could not; she is far too weak. Then what would become of the house without her? It could not be."

Clifford knit his brows. An idea had suddenly occurred to him. "Will you leave it to me?" he asked. "Will you trust me, and let me arrange it all for you?"

She stopped short, and looked at him with her large, full eyes, inquiringly, gravely, as a child looks at a stranger with

outstretched hand before he places his own warm little palm upon the big, strong one. This was the man she had felt a repulsion to—the man who in her dream had become a statue, with power to strike her down; and now he was beseeching her confidence as a friend.

- "You doubt me." He was half piqued, half gratified. There was a strong feeling of some sort veiled by Thea's manner, and his rapidly growing interest in her preferred feeling of any sort to simple indifference.
- "I thank you from my heart," said Thea, simply. Whether she trusted him or not, she felt grateful.
- "And you will accept artist life, with its difficulties, disappointments, dangers?" He spoke the last word meaningly. "Dangers?" asked Althea. "What dangers?"

For reply he looked straight into her eyes with a peculiar look. It was the first time she had seen an expression of concentrated passion, and she shrank, as if a snake had darted across her path. When she looked again it was gone. Had it been her excited fancy? "I mean the temptations which assail all in a prominent position in the world," he explained lightly. "Temptations to vanity, extravagance, 'worldliness,' as our good friends the divines call it."

"I expect there will be too much to do to think of such things, Mr. Clifford."

"I see you believe in the old adage, 'Satan finds some mischief still,' etc. Dear me!" and he sighed, half with a regretful glance back at the old garden, as he followed Thea into the stable-yard—for he had felt some subtly delicious emotional throbs that still summer morning, and was it likely he would ever see this place again?—half with the species of compunction with which one would gather a perfect fruit, or destroy a frail, lovely bloom by plucking it.

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"You sighed?" Thea looked back with sharp inquiry.

He smiled. "I confess to feeling somewhat of a wretch, Miss Biron, in conniving at your transplantation from this—such a fitting spot for your youth, purity, innocence—to the world. It is almost like unearthing a flower, and planting it among noisome weeds and gruesome plants."

"I wonder I am not so frightened of 'the world,' considering the way you all talk of it, that I am afraid to face it," said Thea. "However, I am not going to be scared by any one. I mean to go into the world unprejudiced. I dare say I shall be able to give it a certificate of health by-and-by. The poor world seems to me in a perpetual state of quarantine."

"It would be better were it to remain so, for beings like you, perhaps." Then he felt as if he were nearing a melting mood—and rallying himself, relapsed into his usual cold indifference, and said somewhat ceremoniously that he thought it was time to say good-bye. Miss Biron might leave her affairs in his hands; he would talk them over with Sir Robert and Lord Belmont, both of whom were greatly interested in her, and they would arrange an interview with Dr. Biron.

But Thea insisted upon his seeing her mother; so he reluctantly followed her through the narrow passage hung with bird-cages, past the open door of the study, that storehouse of old volumes, into the little parlour, the quaintly shaped, darkened room, where the light fell greenly through the lowered venetians upon the arums and lilies in the baywindow, upon the quaint old pictures and ancient furniture, and upon the pale lady in the white cap and kerchief, sitting at the table before a huge basket of linen, a large Bible open at her side.

Clifford had shrunk from seeing Thea's mother. She must, he thought—why he hardly knew—be either commonplace or eccentric. But as this lady with the sweet, resigned face rose and welcomed him without surprise or flurry, motioning him to a

chair with the easy self-possession of a duchess in her own reception-rooms, Thea suddenly appeared in a new light. though he would have denied it to himself, he respected her more, and felt he had adopted a wrong tone. Had he seen Mrs. Biron before, he would scarcely have gone across those fields and appeared at the back; and as he somewhat confusedly talked a little ordinary small-talk, he felt almost angry with the doctor, whose pronounced hilarity had tinged his ideas of the Biron family with contempt. Clifford was conservative. He liked the "right manner in the right place," and thought a doctor, a man who was employed by people to cure them, should be grave and staid, should walk about society in a moral armour of professional mannerism, and be recognized as a clergyman was to be recognized by a certain primness of face, by his white tie and black clothes: accordingly, unknowing that Harry Biron, the son of a slave-owner, afterwards officer in the Dragoons, had blossomed into this débonnair rubicund custodian of bucolic health, he had "set him down" as ill-bred, and therefore unworthy of consideration—an impression which had reflected itself in his conduct to Thea.

He left Mrs. Biron and her daughter with outward ceremoniousness. Inwardly he was disturbed and annoyed. "She is a gentlewoman," he thought, alluding to Thea's mother, "and I wish I had not——"

What he wished he had not done he did not discover at that moment. As he hasped the front garden gate, Jack came cantering by, his horse reeking. Sir Robert had kept him, while he looked through some papers upon which he was to send an answer to Jack's father; and when the young man got away from his durance vile, and was free to join Thea and "circumvent" the handsome Clifford—who might, all that time he was shut up watching the old baronet's white trembling hands leisurely turn over papers, and

laboriously scratch the few lines he had come to fetch, be corrupting the mind of his future wife. His hasty conclusion forced the spur into the shining side of his poor little horse, terrified at the unwonted flick of her master's whip, at the unexpected cruelty—and the bay flew almost wildly across the park, and would have taken the high gate but for a check. Then Jack cantered less furiously into the village, to meet "that man" coming leisurely out of the cottage, his hateful visit paid.

Jack stared him in the face, without returning the salute that Clifford gave him; and it was this insult that relieved Clifford of his faint regrets. As he went home, his only self-reproach was that he had "mixed himself up" with "such boors," while Jack stormed into the stable-yard in a fury of wrath.

The groom was out, the stable-boy at dinner. The old dog with the hazy eyes came out of his kennel, clanking his chain, and wagged his tail deprecatingly, as Jack shouted in the sunlit silence without reply. Then, as he glanced back at his steaming horse with the drooping head, thinking he was too tired not to be safe there alone, Thea came fluttering out of the house. She had seen and heard him.

- "Are you come to stay?" She spoke sweetly, and irritated him the more. "I suppose they are gone to lunch; it is just eleven, I think."
- "And that fellow has been here more than an hour!" Jack glanced at her savagely.
- "Put the bay into the stable, Jack," said Thea, calmly; "and if you want to say unpleasant things, come in out of the sun." She was shading her eyes with her hand.
- "What I have to say is short and to the purpose," said Jack, whose temper was getting the better of him, leading his horse into the stable.

Thea followed him. Her own little black mare whinnied and looked round at

her as she came in. But she was too occupied with the thought of the impending, the imminent quarrel between herself and her betrothed to notice her favourite.

She leant up against the corn-bin, absently playing with oats placed ready in a sieve for the doctor's incoming horse, while Jack loosened the bay's bit in the vacant stall.

- "You will come in?" she asked, as he came back.
- "No," he said angrily. "What I have to say may as well be said here. How did that man get here this morning?"
- "By the way you told him to come, if by 'that man' you mean Mr. Clifford."
 - "Then how long was he here?"
 - "I really did not notice the time."
 - "What did he come for?"
- "To see me, I suppose." Thea was pale, but nonchalant. The idea of being intimidated by Jack! Still she kept cool, though her anger was rising.
 - "Things are coming to a pretty pass

when you can say that to me in cool blood!" cried Jack, furiously; then, suddenly touched, he seized the white hand that was playing with the corn, and said, "For God's sake, Thea, think of what you are doing!"

"I do think, and I have thought, Jack, and I am going to think, for this is the turning-point of my life."

Jack dropped her hand, as if it had stung him.

"I am glad you have come, for I hate to keep anything from you. Jack, I have made up my mind; I shall be an artist."

Jack smiled—a sneering smile. "You are crazy just for the moment," he said. "You believe all the fine things these people say to you. You don't think they laugh at you behind your back. You an artist! You can't know what artists are, if you say that. I must say I had no idea you were so vain, Thea."

He could scarcely have taken a worse course to influence her. Thea heard the

words, and believed he meant what he said, not detecting the bitter jealousy, the cruel fear, that prompted him to say the most cutting things he could think of. "He neither understands nor appreciates me," was her comment, and Jack fell in her estimation, as if he had been thrown headlong from a precipice into space.

- "You are welcome to your opinion," she coolly said. "And I really don't care what you think. My mind is made up."
- "And so is mine!" hissed Jack, who was pacing the stable. "The day you appear for the first time in public, I leave England for ever."
- "England will scarcely break its heart, dear. There are plenty more Jacks alive, I dare say."
- "I know you underrate me," said the young man; "and you underrate my love for you. You cannot see what you are doing, that you are going to wreck yourself, body and soul; and you cannot see that I love you so dearly that I would go now you. I.

and be killed to save you from disgrace, which this notion of yours will surely bring you to. Oh, Thea, I could not stay to see it! That is why I say the day you appear in public I leave England—till you send for me," he added falteringly. "Thea, when every one else has cast you off, I will take you and love you."

"And you cannot see how you are insulting me?" She was half breathless. "Oh, if there were only some wise person—some great, undisturbed mind—who could tell us the truth, who could show you where you are wrong, who could tell me what to do!" She leant her elbows on the corn-bin, and clasped her hot head with her hands.

"Had you any right, Thea, to make me think of marrying you, and then to behave . like this? Did I ask you——"

"Stop!" said Thea. "Jack, you are going too far. I release you; you are free. Good-bye."

He caught her in his arms as she was

leaving the stable, and kissed her passionately. When she struggled free, his hot tears were on her cheek. "Can't you see that I am jealous?" he said, in a broken voice. "Cannot you have pity? Can you not make allowances when you think that I know I shall lose you?"

"I pity you for the poor opinion you have of me," said Thea. Then she swept scornfully indoors, leaving him penitent and half broken-hearted.

There was nothing to do but to mount his horse and ride home. What a difference between the fresh snorting steed and the straight young rider that had come into the field that morning, and the miserable stooping figure which bent over the tired horse that crept slowly up the slope leading to the steward's farm! As much difference as between the careless, happy girl that had lain in the hammock one summer morning and the troubled, excited Thea that locked her door and, flinging herself upon her bed, wept passionately, without

relief, at the "cruel things" her lover had said.

The sun had "gone out," as they used to say when they were children, and the sky clouded over. It was as if the gardengate had been left open, and some noxious creature had crept in, even as the serpent had crept into Eden.

"Everything is changed," mused Thea, as she regained a sad composure. "Something is in my life which was not there before, which changes everything, turns everything to bitterness. What can it be? what can it be?"



BOOK I. IN THE WORLD.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST STEP.

THE Honourable John Clifford, in spite of his apparent nonchalance, had, as his friends sometimes said, "the very devil in him" when he "took anything in hand." Now that he had drifted into taking part in Thea's affairs, he did not let matters rest. Before he left Elfield, it was arranged that the girl was to be a public singer, and that no minor considerations were to be allowed to intervene until a successful debut was made. Dr. Biron had been summoned to Elfield Hall to a meeting which had almost the pregnant solemnity of a council. The old butler, who always knew the family affairs and the family's ideas better than the family itself, had

with confidential gravity conducted the doctor to Sir Robert's room, where Lord Belmont was ensconced in a great chair on one side of the office table, and Sir Robert presided in his writing-chair with a magisterial air, while Clifford leant easily against the mantelpiece in the shade. It might have been a momentous consultation. Biron could scarcely rid himself of the feeling that a patient in desperate case lay upstairs, or that a still corpse, hidden close before burial, occasioned this mid-day meeting; and the sensation was strengthened by the spasmodic efforts at small-talk between the gentlemen, as, the doctor having accepted a seat, Johnson, the aforesaid butler, entered, followed by a footman, each solemnly depositing a silver tray bearing decanters and salvers of biscuits before they withdrew—when the usual pause ensued, the calm before the storm of debate.

Lord Belmont spoke first, quoting his "nephew Clifford," who thought it de-

pendent upon him, as having been the discoverer of Miss Biron's evident call to the musical world, to advise that her proclivities should be considered and dealt with. Then Sir Robert made a weak, but passionate little speech, repeating himself a good deal, and talking feebly of the wonderful Jacobite instincts that parallel with his young friend's talents, and how all true successors of the supporters of the great family of the Stuarts should consider it a duty—ay, a sacred duty-to further the interests of all true Stuart-lovers, no matter where or how those interests lay, etc., etc.; during which Lord Belmont looked down, seemingly occupied in balancing his eyeglass on one finger; and when Sir Robert subsided, flushed and trembling, Clifford lounged from his position in the shade and said, "The matter seems to me to lie in a nut-Here is a gifted girl; is she to shell. make use of her gifts or no?"

The commonplace shot seemed to startle

the meeting into a less exalted mood. There was scarcely need for debate, the three, Lord Belmont, Sir Robert, and Clifford, being agreed upon that main point of discussion, Thea's artistic commission, which was the secret delight of Doctor Biron's soul. So that the discussion resolved itself into the passing of resolutions, one of which was that Clifford was to advise, undertake, and pronounce upon each step of the young singer's career, and that when funds were wanted ("as they would be, pretty constantly," suggested Clifford), they would be advanced by Lord Belmont and Sir Robert, to be returned when the prima donna would be "making her thousands."

"No doubt she will be able to buy us all up," said Sir Robert, as he shook the doctor's hands in the hall at parting (the mention of repayment from a woman had been gall to the chivalrous old man); "but mind, Biron, on no account will I ever take one farthing of the dear child's earn-

ings. And, Biron "—here he nervously slid a rough little lump into the doctor's hand—"there is a little birthday present for Miss Althea. I do not know what young ladies want, you know, and even my lady is a little behind the times."

But Doctor Biron expostulated; it was wonderfully good of Sir Robert, but Thea's birthday was in February—a long time yet.

- "All the better, my dear friend. This will be for last birthday, and I shall have the pleasure of repeating the offence sooner than I had hoped." And to save wounding the good old gentleman's generosity, the doctor was forced to retain the little netted purse, which was found to contain notes and gold to the amount of a hundred pounds, and over which he had more of a scene with Thea than he had ever had.
- "It was meant to buy gowns and things," he declared.
 - "But it would keep me in gowns for

five years," said Thea, with tears in her eyes. "Oh, papa, I can't take it."

However, after she had been called proud, ungracious, even ungrateful, she gave way, and wrote a little note to Sir Robert, which he carefully locked away although there was something about it he could scarcely understand, a gleam of tender heart-brokenness. She seldom thought of him again without pain, and never without some fresh plan of repaying that gift with compound interest, some day building almshouses or a school, or endowing some institution in his name. had often heard it said that Sir Robert was not even well off for his position, and that he had known hard times. such a one could scarcely be rich.

Thea took the arrangements for her future very quietly. Elation was impossible, while Jack caused her these heart-pangs. Since the quarrel in the stable she had not seen him. He had never kept away from her like this before, do what she might—

although she had gone rather far sometimes in brusque self-assertion; and, however careless and joyous she might pretend to be to herself as well as to others during those long summer days, when night came and she was alone in her own room, her lip would quiver and her eyes fill as she sighed, "Oh, I do miss him!" only he could have sympathized with her, upheld her at this crisis! But she was thrown upon herself. Doctor Biron was too enthusiastic to please her—she hardly understood him; the idea had not been represented to her mother as yet, and Clifford kept studiously away. self-communings he had resolved to "do what he could for the girl," but not to be "dragged into anything," as he termed his own excursions into the world presided over by little Cupid. He liked the girl, but he determined not to see her alone. and admired himself hugely for his wisdom. But why did he ignore that suggestion made by the undercurrent of his thoughts

—"Plenty of time by-and-by? Why scare the bird that you want to perch on your finger?"

He would see her before he left Elfield. And a good opportunity occurred. He met Doctor Biron, looking troubled, the very morning he intended to call at the cottage, and the doctor told him the cause of the trouble. "The truth is," he acknowledged, "that I daren't tell my wife, Mr. Clifford. You see, she has lived a retired life, out of the world. She has such curious ideas about publicity."

"I see," said Clifford. Then he suddenly proposed to suggest the matter to Mrs. Biron himself. He was behind the scenes; he knew exactly how to represent the artistic world to such a mind as Mrs. Biron's—"if you will trust me," he added.

"My dear sir!" was the doctor's warm reply, with a broad smile of intense relief. His opinion was that Clifford was an "awfully clever fellow" (proved, indeed, by his recognition of Thea's talents); then, he had "blue blood." "It always tells," he said to himself, thinking of the interview between Clifford and his wife. He could not but believe, professedly unworldly as she seemed to be, that the words of the Honourable John Clifford, heir to the rich earldom of Belmont, would carry weight.

They did. But not, be it said in Mrs. Biron's favour, because of the blue blood or the earldom, but because of Clifford's natural talent for the management of He would, as it were, test the women. pulse of their emotions, and treat with them according to its variations. As he sat there in the cool parlour, recounting the true story of artist life to the pale, anxious lady, whose instincts had warned her of some peril to her darling—she knew not what-Thea sat by, listening in wonderment. Was an artistic career really the holy, beautiful office Clifford's arguments asserted that it was? Was a singer an apostle, a messenger to mankind, primed

with heavenly revelation as to the vexed questions that agitated their mind? She had had such ideas, though she had not put them into words. As she heard, she herself, undoubting as to the speaker's sincerity, was influenced, consoled, strengthened; and Mrs. Biron, to whom the news of Thea's new life would have been a shock under any circumstances, was made to feel somewhat as the mother of a martyr or a saint, and could but sacrifice her own personal feelings there and then.

"In these cases mothers cannot think of themselves, Mr. Clifford," was her faint little speech, as he said good-bye. "As you all, so much wiser than myself, think it for the best, so must I."

But her sad face, her paled lips, haunted Clifford as he rode away. He consoled himself with the reflection that he had been quite truthful. "I only gave her the ideal side, instead of the actual," he said to himself, "and nothing would keep that girl back now that she has 'tasted blood,' now that she has seen the effect she can produce."

He had undertaken to find a home for Thea in London, where she could pursue her studies in peace. When "money is no object," it would seem easy to find some such corner among the forests of houses inhabited by countless thousands of different human beings. But when Clifford was settled in his chambers, had paid brief visits to his club and his various haunts, had mastered the contents of his numerous letters, and had replied, and at last found himself comparatively free, his first sober reflection upon the domiciling of the doctor's daughter was, "How on earth I am to set about it I don't know."

He had glanced through the long array of tempting advertisements in the daily papers, to throw aside the sheets in disgust. "No one advertises for a girl," he thought; "it is all men, men!" Which gave rise to the reflection that it must be

exceptional for a young girl to require housing by strangers. "Of course Mrs. Biron ought to have brought her and stayed with her," he thought, irritably twisting his moustache; "but if she can't, there's an end of it. But some one ought to do the mother business. Surely there is some one to be found who likes young girls? By Jove, I have it!"

He suddenly remembered a cousin—a maiden lady, Miss Helme—a prim, quaint little personage, whose deferential smoothness of manner had considerably irritated him when a blunt, conceited boy, before he had been fagged by a big bully at Eton. Miss Helme was a distant relation of the Belmonts. She was the tapering end of a doubtful offshoot, with some money of her own—much humility when in the presence of the grand trunk of the great family, much hauteur (when out of its shadow) towards the world in general. Clifford had not seen Miss Helme for years—had no idea what had become

of her—but if to be found, he knew she would do anything for the heir to the Belmonts, even to the blacking of his boots. The only question was, how to find her?

Lord Belmont's private secretary might know-so he took a hansom, and straightway drove to his uncle's residence. Before he had had time to ring the bell, the door opened, and the earl himself, in his faultless town costume, his unwrinkled, tightly buttoned blue frock-coat, his shining hat set jauntily upon his perfumed locks, his cane tucked under his arm, came out, fitting on his new vellow The exclamations, "My dear gloves. boy!" and "Why, uncle, I had no idea you were in town!" were uttered simultaneously. Then Clifford, primed with his idea, burst out with, "Uncle, where is Miss Helme?"

"Miss—Helme? Oh, of course—poor little Miss Helme! What do you want with her?"

Clifford explained, ending with, "Don't you ever saddle yourself with a girl, uncle."

Lord Belmont smiled a peculiar smile. "Chevaney can tell you all about her, I dare say," he said. "And no doubt she will be glad to do anything she can. You go to him; he is in his office. See you at dinner?" And with a waved farewell he tripped down the steps, while Clifford went in to pursue his inquiries in the office of Mr. Chevaney, his lordship's secretary.

This head official in Lord Belmont's household had been appointed to his post more because of his peculiarly impecunious position in society, as one of the many younger sons of a younger son of a well-known family, than for his aptitude for the management of figures. Poor Chevaney bore out this fact by the hopeless expression with which he pored over the big ledgers, and by his generally fagged aspect, even when he simpered a wan simper

in return to an occasional compassionate smile flashed upon him at luncheon by the stately Maud—the outward visible sign of her inward spiritual thought, "Poor wretch!"

The "poor wretch," who had been running his fingers through his hair while endeavouring to master certain instructions Lord Belmont had given him, welcomed Clifford as he naturally would welcome the heir-apparent. "Only too pleased to be of service to Mr. Clifford in any way. He had not communicated with Miss Helme for some time. Their correspondence, indeed, had mostly been on the subject of repairs at her house, at Richmond, a small property of his lordship's which he had given Miss Helme for life. She was a curious little lady, who could not make up her mind to lessen the state in which she had been brought up. He (Chevaney) believed she even stinted herself of comforts to maintain the household she had been accustomed to. It was not at all likely she would be away from her abode—"The Retreat, Richmond."

Clifford entered the address in his pocketbook, and withdrew. At first he meant to go to Richmond by rail, but a glance at the fresh-looking cob, which happened to toss its head and snort as the door closed behind him, led him to ask the driver of the hansom that brought him whether he could go to Richmond. "Where you please; my lord," was the man's replywho had recognized Lord Belmont, known to cab-drivers generally as carrying fewer shillings than half-sovereigns in his pocket, and scented a generous fare. So Clifford was soon bowling along the Fulham Road, less in love with his errand than he had been yet.

"I hate those slimy crawling toadies," he thought in allusion to Miss Helme, as he moodily lit a cigar. "After all, rank and wealth is a species of carrion, perpetually surrounded by vultures." Then the recollection of Thea flashed across him

—her innocent openness, her ingenuous frankness—"which I am helping to spoil," he grimly thought. "Six months hence, what will she be?"

Presently, as they drove between marketgardens of roses, through roads bordered by green fields, and when the quaint square mansions of the little town were passed, and he saw how quiet and unworldly was the spot in which he thought to cage the untamed singing-bird—he felt that if she must run the gauntlet of the debased influences that ran riot in society, she might at least have a refuge here.

"But I will not consign her to this woman's care," he thought, with a sudden rush of violent feeling that startled him, "unless I am thoroughly convinced she is worthy of the sacred charge."

The cabman had pulled up at a postern door in a high red wall, which was surmounted by a mediæval rooflet—a shelter for visitors in bad weather—on which was inscribed "The Retreat." Ivy crowned the walls, and its festoons hung over, swaying gently in the breeze. Telling the driver where to put up, he rang the bell. Suddenly the door opened, and a little old man, grey-haired, in an old-fashioned, somewhat rusty black suit, kneebreeches, silk stockings, and shoes with buckles, inquired "his pleasure."

Clifford presented his card. "Was Miss Helme at home?"

The old man, after holding the card close to his eyes, bowed low, and ushered him along a red-tiled walk—from which he could see a curious old garden, its borders divided by high box, its square lawn studded with peacocks, fans, and teapots of yew—and into a dark hall, the light casting gleams through the coloured panes in its domed roof on the few old oak chairs and chests, on a bronze shield or two flanked with spears, and some huge china jars.

"My mistress is dressing for dinner, sir,

but will shortly join you," said the old man, as he ushered Clifford into a lowceilinged, darkened chamber. Then he placed a chair for the guest, after a short struggle drew up the Venetian blind, and went off, the card gingerly held between his finger and thumb, to acquaint Miss Helme's own maid of the honour that had befallen them in a visit from the heirapparent; while Clifford looked round the room, its spindle-legged, carefully kept furniture ranged against the wainscoted walls, its faded carpet covered with white linen, its many-legged centre table crowded with bits of curious china and with "Books of Beauty," in which he might have discovered simpering portraits of family beauties in the Georgian reigns, and then walked to the window and looked into the garden as in a dream. There was a faint scent of bygone, worn-out sachets, sandalwood, old ivory—the perfume that greets the opener of a long-shut-up box of chessmen-in fact, the general odour that pervades an old country house that is frequently closed and shuttered. It was like suddenly stepping back into life as it was fifty years ago, he thought—an impression strengthened as he looked through the open windows upon the quaint yew figures, and a fragrance floated towards him of sweet-brian and southernwood. Here it. seemed difficult to realize the fact of railways, electric telegraphs, flaring advertisements, glaring shop-fronts, and all the modern vulgarities. "If only she is like her surroundings, it will do," he was thinking of Miss Helme, as the door opened and she walked into the room.

She was much shorter, smaller than he had expected. Of course when he last saw her he was a young boy. Miss Helme paused for a moment before she came across to the young man, who towered above her and shook her hand, while she dropped a quaint little curtsy.

"I should not have known you, Mr. Clifford. Last time I had the honour of

meeting you, you were a little fellow about leaving home for Eton."

Clifford accepted a seat with his back to the window, while Miss Helme demurely arranged her skirts and subsided into one of her little linen-covered prie-dieu chairs. She was thin, slim, with an attenuated aquiline face, a gentle mouth drawn a little on one side, and very soft brown eyes, that had a far-away look, half apologetic, half resigned. Clifford thought he had seen that look before—in the eyes of some timid but attached dog. Then he noticed the extreme neatness of the evening gown—a shot silk, faded by age, but so carefully kept it boasted neither crease nor stain—the close lace ruffle round the withered throat, the aptly quilled cap, studded with tiny flowers to match the gown, tied around the smooth grey hair and under her chin. "She will do," he thought.

"I hope dear Lord Belmont is quite well; also her ladyship; also my beautiful young cousin."

- "You mean Maud? They are all very well, thank you."
- "And you yourself, Mr. Clifford? This kind visit is a most unexpected pleasure."

"Well, Miss Helme, it is as much on my uncle's account as my own. I also represent Sir Robert Manners—you remember Sir Robert, of course? The old gentleman is getting into years, but as lively as ever, taking the same active interest in everything and everybody. The truth is that we—or rather Lord Belmont and Sir Robert—want your help."

A slight flush crossed Miss Helme's thin face. "I fear—but, of course, anything I can do—you know how deeply indebted I am to my good cousin Lord Belmont, Mr. Clifford."

Clifford waived that question. "Lord Belmont thought you were the very one who could help them; in fact, really the only person he would like to ask," he said.

What could it be? As Clifford hesitated a moment, wondering how to put it to

her most effectively and effectually, vague fears troubled Miss Helme's hitherto undisturbed placidity. What if they wanted her to do something impossible, and she under such weighty obligations to Lord Belmont!

It was quite a relief when Clifford, seeing her scared expression, said reassuringly, "It is really nothing very alarming, Miss Helme. They only want you to invite a young lady, a very charming girl, to stay with you for a few months."

The little spinster breathed again. Still, the idea of some fashionable young lady, full of the terrible spirits of the young people of to-day, being suddenly billeted upon her, to upset the quiet house, the servants, the unvarying routine, was overwhelming.

"I am afraid the young lady would not like it," she stammered. "You see, Mr. Clifford, I am quite a recluse—out of the world. The clergyman calls sometimes, but there is no one to visit, of course. I

gave up society when I came here." (This was Miss Helme's little method of accepting the fact that society had quietly dropped her.)

Clifford explained that this was just what they wanted; at all events, for the present. Then he told Thea's story as shortly as he could. In spite of Miss Helme's anxiety to be interested, to fall in with "the family's views," she shrank a little.

"I suppose her father, the doctor, is some distant connection?" she asked, knitting her brow. "Let me see; I think I know all the branches and their connections by heart. I don't remember any doctor. Of course we know there have been members of families who have been physicians," she added apologetically, as if fearing Clifford would be shocked at her suggestion that even a distant connection should be a "paid servant of society." "No?" (for he shook his head). "What family do they belong to, might I ask?"

He explained that this young lady, in point of fact, could be claimed by none. Of course her family was a family; but—then he floundered—and it suddenly struck him that "this sort of thing," this parcelling people into lots, "born" or "not born," had its ludicrous side. "Well, the truth is," he said desperately, "this girl is going to study to be a public singer."

For a moment the world seemed to Miss Helme to swim, and she to be half-drowned by the wave of humiliation that made her heart sink. Had she come to this! Clifford did not dream of what was passing in the little lady's mind, as she sat seemingly thinking, her hands quietly resting on her lap. He could not imagine, indeed, how the simple pride which Miss Helme, when young, shared in common with most people of birth, had been first stung by neglect, then wounded by the feeling of insignificance, and nourished by lonely life till it had become a passion, her very life

itself, sensitive to less than a glance or a word—to a possible suggestion.

"I fear the idea is scarcely pleasant to you," began Clifford, kindly.

"You see, I have lived so out of the world," she said, her voice trembling a little. "Of course people think so differently now. In my day a public singer was scarcely considered a proper person, certainly not to be brought into contact with ladies, Mr. Clifford. Excuse me for saying so; I am merely stating what it was then. Of course it is otherwise now, and doubtless it is for the best." Her head drooped, her eyes sought the floor.

Clifford eagerly assured her that indeed these caste privileges were rapidly disappearing. "You see, the love for art is bringing about the recognition of an aristocracy of art," he said. "I can assure you, Miss Helme, that the great womensingers are much more thought of in society than its own beauties used to be." Then he ran through a list of distinguished names, prime donne, authoresses. even set the fashions," he added, quivering on the borderland between fact and fancy; "and don't forget the first Countess of Belmont, who was even more thought of than had she boasted the bluest blood in the realm. Then we must not ignore the fact that our biggest families have sprung from such roots; for instance, Nell Gwynne. I did not mean that exactly," he added, annoyed with himself, as he saw Miss Helme visibly shudder. "I was betrayed into extremes. Of course Nell Gwynne has nothing to do with the case in point." Then he rapidly expatiated upon Thea's innocence, virtue, unsophistication, and her wonderful gift. "There is only one term to be applied when speaking of her," he "She is a genius."

"Oh dear!" said Miss Helme, helplessly. This was the climax. In her youth, spent in a country hall distant from any town, she had heard the word "genius" coupled, with bated breath, with the outlawed name you. I.

of Lord Byron. Gathered round the schoolroom fire in the winter gloaming, the governess would whisper contraband sayings anent that "awful man." Miss Helme would have as soon thought of possessing Byron's works as of carrying a loaded revolver; and when, on finding some excerpts from the "Hebrew Melodies" in some volumes entitled "Pleasures of Literature," she had read and actually enjoyed them, she had long suffered the pangs of shame and remorse in conse-Therefore, when Clifford's peroraquence. tion concluded with the word "genius," she could not help saying, "Oh dear! then perhaps she will have loaded pistols by her bedside, and shoot through the curtains. am sure my butler John will not stay, Mr. Clifford, and he has been with me twenty-four years. Then my maid Atkins, a most reliable, respectable person—I am quite sure nothing would induce Atkins to remain in the house, Mr. Clifford. As it is, she is obliged to barricade her door; she is so afraid of burglars."

The more Miss Helme displayed her simplicity the more determined—he knew not why—was Clifford that here, and here only, should Althea live during her student life. So he argued kindly with the little woman, and succeeded so far in persuading her that Althea was "so ethereal a creature that she was less like a woman than an angel," that it was not long before the conversation resolved itself into questions of how and when Thea should become an inmate of "The Retreat."

"But, oh dear me! she will bring a maid," suddenly said Miss Helme, the thought flashing across her just when Clifford's arguments were bringing her to a more cheerful view of the question. "And really the servants' offices are too small as it is; Atkins is always on the point of complaining—"

Clifford reassured her on this point.

"But she must have some one to wait upon her," decided Miss Helme, uneasily. "What would the servants think? It would never do for her to dress herself. It could not be. Would you mind deferring any further arrangements till I have talked the matter over with Atkins, Mr. Clifford?" (coaxingly).

"Why not send for Atkins and speak to her now?" asked Clifford. He found the situation almost amusing.

"Ah! perhaps that would be the best." Miss Helme was getting excited. She had two pink spots on her thin cheeks, and her hand trembled as she pulled the faded embroidered bell-pull—a summons replied to by John with almost suspicious celerity, and speedily followed by the entry of Atkins, a grey-haired woman, whose eyes squinted searchingly outwards, whose trim gown was protected by a large white apron, and who wore a plain cap tied under her chin. Atkins saluted Mr. Clifford with a deep obeisance, and, although her eyes seemingly gazed steadily at the walls on either side, was regarding him with reverential awe as she received her mistress's half-despairing account of what was in store for them all with grave, respectful "Yes, ma'ams," brought out at the right moments in a tone which, if not betraying enthusiasm, was at least neutral.

"I should think Martha would be able to wait upon the young lady, ma'am. You see, she has not much to do, and she used to brush your hair when I was ill."

"Suppose we ask Martha her opinions on the subject," suggested Clifford. He was rather curious to see the one young creature in this "museum of ancient specimens of humanity," as he inwardly named the abode—"evidently a giddy young thing by the way they speak of her," he thought, as Atkins respectfully retired, and Miss Helme remarked with satisfaction upon her "intelligent suggestion."

"Come in, Martha," she called out reassuringly, as the door slowly opened, and the half of a gaunt middle-aged person appeared and as suddenly disappeared. "Come in; Mr. Clifford wishes to speak to you."

The timid young creature was a thin woman of forty, with a large nose and a faltering manner, who blushed vehemently as she stammered assents to everything proposed to her, twisting the corner of her apron, and retreating with alacrity when dismissed.

"The next question is, the piano," said Clifford.

Miss Helme gave a frightened sideglance at a tiny instrument placed against the wall. "Will she want to practise much, do you think?" she anxiously demanded. "Let me show you my piano, Mr. Clifford." And she carefully untied the many strings of the linen case, through which the thin legs protruded like withered mummy-limbs. "It was one of the first squares Broadwood ever made." She spoke in a hushed voice, as a collector might of the first proof of an extinct engraving. "I only allow it to be touched on occasions. Once a year I ask the vicar and his daughter to tea, and she is a splendid performer; but even she, actually, broke a string."

"I suppose you had it mended." The thin strings, the faded morsels of red felt, the skinny, worn hammers, and the slender frame, made the old instrument look to Clifford the very fleshless skeleton of a dead pianoforte. The keyboard, with here and there a missing ivory, seemed to wear the ghastly grin of the half-toothless skull. He struck the keys, and a sharp, expostulatory twang sounded in the old room. To fancy Thea—soft, young, bounding and pulsating with life-singing with those harsh, quavering chords breaking into the - round melody of her voice! "I am sure Miss Biron would not like to risk a second accident of the kind," he assured Miss Helme. "No, she must have an instrument of her own." Then the question arose as to where such an instrument should be placed; and to convince her

determined guest that the miniature mansion contained no such corner for the admission of the smallest specimen of pianofortes, she conducted him through the dining-room and into the tiny study, which had seemingly been made from a cupboard into a room by the building out of a small conservatory.

"John could not do without a sideboard for his plate and decanters," she said with a faint tinge of satisfaction, with a lurking hope that this difficulty might put an end to the threatened invasion. "So you see there is no place for a piano, Mr. Clifford." Her triumph even led her to hazard a faint, almost profane attempt at jocularity. "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

But Clifford was merciless. "Then the only plan will be for Miss Biron to have it in her bedroom," he decided coldly, tossing his handsome head.

Miss Helme succumbed, alarmed—and soon found out that there would be a

better arrangement than this—the "work-room." It was in the servants' quarters, certainly—beyond that baize door dividing the servers from the served which she passed only when she made her quarterly inspections of the entire premises; but perhaps it would do.

Clifford liked the room, one side of which sloped with the roof. Its casement window overlooked the green garden, and framed a smiling picture of orchards and fields; the old, sloping boards were worm-eaten;—but planed and coloured; with a few rugs here, and a curtain or two tastefully draped there, with the piano, bookshelves, a few odd chairs—

What was it? The thought of Althea there made his heart beat, sent the blood to his pale face. Miss Helme, uneasily hovering about, wondered why her distinguished guest flushed up suddenly as he looked around. She little knew that at this moment a strange sensation agitated him. He did not see the bare walls, the

naked boards, the lumber; he saw the room as it would be when his care had transformed it. He saw each item distinctly, perfectly, as it would be; and he saw and felt even more—he fancied himself sitting on a couch, Althea clinging to him.

"I beg your pardon," he said suddenly She had asked him some to Miss Helme. question twice. Then he followed her downstairs, and briefly entered upon the delicate question of finance. Miss Biron would have her own income, of which Miss Helme would be custodian, even in the matters of dress and pocket-money. to this the little spinster demurred. could not interfere so far as that. Biron should decide," was Clifford's suggestion, as he took leave and walked to the inn where he had directed his cabman to put up, even more disturbed in mind than Miss Helme herself.

During this eventful hour, he had not only so far got rid of his self-assumed responsibilities, and found a safe home for Althea, but he had violently disturbed these sedate old lives—as when he was a lad he had disturbed quiet old fish by throwing stones into a still pool—and, above all, he had had a glimpse of what was working in his own mind.

He had often deceived himself, and thereby "got himself into trouble." time he would not. As he thought that Althea had "taken his fancy," he smiled scornfully, and almost hated her for it, although he was in honour bound to acknowledge she had not "laid herself out to catch him," as others had done before her. "And it is quite clear she almost dislikes me," he thought. "It is only my own ridiculous folly. Perhaps the more I see of her the better: it would soon cure me." But this last he rightly recognized as the subtle subterfuge of his awakened impulses. "No, no," he said, half amused, as he recognized that, in spite of his thirty years, the processes of his mind were still young, "that won't do at all. I will go abroad for the winter, as I intended."

This idea had originated in a long visitation of a peculiar sort of ennui to which he was subject. While the "fit was on" everything bored him. It bored him to get up and occupy himself; it bored him to go to bed and sleep, or to sit still. Society disgusted him, and solitude was hateful. Theatres were a miserable attempt to amuse, music had an empty sound; and how any one could detect the faintest humour or wit in the books and periodicals that professed either or both, was mystery. The world resolved itself into a perpetual dance of death; and when a pretty face smiled upon him, he disgustedly thought of how that face would look a century hence, when it was "boxed up underground." for this $\mathbf{A}\mathbf{n}\mathbf{d}$ wretched state he could find no cure. doctors told him there was nothing the matter with his liver, and that although he complained of finding no taste in anything that "they gave him to eat," his digestion was perfect. When he paid a visit to the famous Sir Wharton Goodchild—that bland autocrat as the wonted golden drop fell into its deftly hollowed cup, his palm, advised his patient to "go North." "You want change, my good This season life frets your active sir. temperament," he said, speaking of the "ozone-laden breezes" and "bright, fresh winds" of "the North" with the same unction with which perhaps, an hour later, he would extol the "warm, perfumed air" and the "hot earth teeming with aromatic exhalations of the sunny South," to some withered consumptive.

"I will go North," decided Clifford that day, as he returned to town, acquainting the family Belmont of his intention when he dined at Belmont House that very evening, partly as a safeguard against changing his mind—for he would not be set down as "vacillating"—partly to reassure them that he had no ulterior motives underlying

his interest in Althea. Since that idea that came to him in the "workroom" at Miss Helme's, he jealously suspected every one of "having thought something" anent himself and Miss Biron.

While Clifford was straightening Thea's future paths for her, she was passing the time somewhat drearily. The first few days of a suspense may be exciting, but when uncertainty grows stale, it is depressing. Thea, doubting the reality of the situation, doubting that Clifford would really make any tangible arrangements, or that the talk would end in aught save smoke, began to doubt herself, and could scarcely bear to think of her "prospects," her "future." Then it was depressing to see Mrs. Biron wan and melancholy, and to discover her quietly shedding tears; and Jack she avoided as much as she could, for, although he had resumed his regular visits, his attempts to be the same were a dismal failure, and she could not help noticing that he looked worn and angular—years

older. Both Jack and her mother caused Althea to feel actual remorse; but even this hurt her less than Doctor Biron's hilarious elation, which, though she dearly loved him, she could not help feeling as out of place. The very animals seemed dejectedly to shun her; the very familiar trees and shrubs seemed to droop disconsolately. She fought the miserable sensations by taking long rides, sometimes accompanying Doctor Biron on his rounds.

At last came the day of the "school-treat," the grand day of the year to the National School children, when they were let loose in the pleasant fields adjoining the vicarage, first to romp and play games, then to feast in a tent. Thea forgot her life-problems, rushing about, organizing the play; and she and Jack, who had been her active assistant, walked back to the cottage arm-in-arm, almost as confidingly as in the good old times. They were sitting in the front garden in the moonlight (the doctor had been with them,

but had been called to a patient), when a letter was brought to Thea with "Sir Robert's best regards. It had just arrived by special messenger."

"My fate," thought Thea, as she went into the dining-room and lit a taper. She felt a strange thrill as she saw Clifford's clear, firm handwriting for the first time. Before she opened the letter, she looked at the superscription. There was something about the decided characters which gave her courage. Then she unfolded the sheet and read—

"-Club, Pall Mall, August, 18-.

"MY DEAR MISS BIRON,

"I am pleased to tell you I have found a suitable home for you with a kinswoman of Lord Belmont's—Miss Helme. She lives a short distance from London, in a pleasant little house at Richmond, where you will scarcely miss your home comforts, and Miss Helme has nothing to do but to look after them and yourself. I am sure you will like each other. Miss Helme has some slight peculiarities, but these are more than counterbalanced by her exceeding worth—my opinion of which is sufficiently proved by my having confided you to her care with perfect confidence that the trust will be well fulfilled.

"The home having been found, the next question is how your studies are to be Lord Belmont has arranged carried on. with Vogel to give you a lesson every day. Three times a week he will go to you at Richmond, as he fortunately visits your neighbourhood; the other three days Miss Helme will take you to Belmont House, where Vogel is engaged to practise with his lordship, Lady Maud, and others on those mornings. This will admit of your practising operatic concerted pieces, and of your voice getting accustomed to a large area (for they practise in the picturegallery).

"Nothing remains but for you to acquaint Miss Helme of the date of your you. I.

arrival; and wishing you all success in your student career,

"I am, dear Miss Biron,
"Faithfully yours,
"J. STUART CLIFFORD.

"P.S.—I quite regret that I cannot hear the effect of your voice at Belmont House. I leave England for at least six months the day after to-morrow. Miss Helme's address is, 'The Retreat,' Richmond."

Thea's heart beat furiously as she rapidly read the letter her trembling fingers could scarcely hold. Elation, pleasure, hope, certainty—then her eyes fixed themselves upon the postscript, which she read and re-read. What could it be that made her feel sick, faint, and giddy, as if she had had a sudden blow? She looked up (she was standing by the mantelpiece) and saw her face in the glass, white and ghastly. Wondering, she bowed her head upon her trembling hands and asked herself "what this meant."

"It must be the sudden shock of all being arranged beyond recall," she persuaded herself, as she sat down and stimulated herself by thinking "how good Mr. Clifford had been, and how beautifully he had arranged everything." Then Jack, who had been pacing the gravel walk outside in a silent rage of mingled emotions, pushed aside the hanging venetian and came in. Thea held the letter to him with a wan smile. "Read it," she said, feeling, she knew not why, that something about that letter would weaken Jack's horror of her "future."

While he shaded his face with his hand, and slowly read it, once, twice, thrice, she leant back, feeling as one who has seen his death-warrant, and wondering, puzzling, why she should feel thus. "It is the surprise coming when I am so tired," she thought, with a leap of hope. What was it that she feared, dreaded?

Jack's face was comforting as he folded the letter and, coming towards her, laid it gently on her lap. Then he seated himself by her, and looked into her eyes with a wistful tenderness that touched her deeply. She had never felt so tenderly towards him as when he said—

"Thea dear, although I feel exactly the same about your being a professional, I must do that Mr. Clifford the credit that he has managed it in the least unpleasant way. I did not know he was such a good fellow. I am sorry I misjudged him." Then he stooped and kissed her. Her lips were cold as ice. "You are ill," he said in some alarm.

But she rallied herself, and declared it was simple fatigue.

Jack was all devotion that evening; and the four discussed the letter and Althea's move to Richmond very pleasantly, almost merrily, later on in the diningroom. Next morning a prim little note of thanks went to Mr. Clifford from Althea; and a few days later the farewell had been gone through, and Althea was stand-

ing on the deck of the London steamer by her father's side, waving her handkerchief to Jack and her mother, who were on the pier surrounded by the wistfully whining dogs.

CHAPTER II.

"THE RETREAT."

ALTHEA will scarcely forget the morning she sat on the deck of the steamer, which surely but slowly—for it voyaged against wind and tide—throbbed through dancing wavelets of the wide river, bearing her away from the little group clustered on the pier, that grew smaller and smaller as her eyes were fixed in that direction with an aching longing. Mrs. Biron stood straight and still, while Jack, at her side, hat in hand, the sun gilding his fair head, drooped dejectedly, and the dogs clustered at the very edge, stretching their heads and sniffing, one squatting in a hopeless attitude and whining as he watched his master and young mistress borne out of

sight, another standing wagging his tail and giving short, impatient barks. The whines and the barks came faintly to the ears of the wistful girl; and even at that moment, as her heart seemed sinking within her with a sort of self-reproach to be voluntarily leaving them all, she could not help thinking that there was as much difference in the emotional displays of dogs as in those of human beings. Her mother and Jack both felt the same at that momentbut how differently they stood there! Biron met her trouble-for Althea knew the parting with her was a trouble—face to face, determinedly, almost defiantly; but Jack quailed. She had seen him succumb, weakly; and, with the curious craving for strength inherent in feminine nature, she thought less of him than had his demeanour been worthy of the stoniest stoic.

Then her father. Dr. Biron was always "Hail, fellow, well met" with all men. Now, in spite of the occasion, in spite of the sorrowful moods of his belongings, he

made no exception to his rule, and was cheerily pacing the deck, his hands in his pockets, joking with the man at the wheel, greeting the passengers he knew, and settling down comfortably at last on the bridge with the red-faced captain. Dr. Biron's wholesale ignoring of the unpleasant which was the mainspring of his popularity, a very talisman in the sickroom, where the depressed patient would say, "The very sight of the doctor's face does me more good than all the physic." He was, so to say, an embodied tonicstimulant, as if he lived on sea-breezes. Even at death-beds and funerals he would "cheer people up," and "put things in the best light." "Life is short, and has to be made the best of," he would say, when he set down all pinings and grievings as " morbid." And this sentiment gave a certain sharpness to his tone, when he cried to Thea from the bridge, "Hulloa, Bob, what's the matter? You look as if you had lost half a crown and found sixpence."

Thea felt annoyed, but the annoyance did her good. Instead of wondering whether she had not made a mistake, whether she was not heartless, etc., etc., she began to think of the future, and to build castles in the air, which, after all, was more profitable mental occupation than regrets, scruples, and self-reproaches.

It was a serene morning—late summer, when the still woodlands were tinged with golden reds and browns; when bare yellow fields of stubble studded with moving spots—the busy gleaners—lay amongst the growing grass, which was to furnish a second hay crop; when the burning fulness of summer was waning into the gentler autumnal calm, so soothing to passionate youth, in the turmoil of wild impulse. If spring starts all into life, and summer floods creation with its steady ardour, autumn lays a gentle hand upon restless being—a mature, experienced hand -whose touch steadies, consoles, and strengthens, even as the quiet counsel of

those who are past self-experiences, hopes, longings, disappointments, agonies, and who have resolved into the secondary place of sympathizing helpers.

Althea, by reason of an over-elaborated organization, was scarcely to be carried to great lengths by her impulses, however strong they might be. Her very susceptibility was her guard. Open to the touch of the whole world—for no one, however mean and inferior, lacked the power to make her wince and shrink even by a word or a look—her perpetual impressions constituted a perpetual network of a subtle Thus, her father's few rough balance. words annoyed her and counteracted her melancholy, and between the two emotions She, as it were, let she grew passive. herself drift along the great river that was bearing her to a new life. The sights and sounds floated past her; she saw and heard almost mechanically; first came the green country—the fields with grazing cows and sheep; beyond, roofs and spires; then more

houses, shipping, wharfs, blackness, a foggy atmosphere through which the sunbeams crept heavily and cast sickly lurid rays.

They were to take the train from Blackwall to London (in those days train-service was meagre and limited), then they were to drive to Miss Helme's Richmond abode. After the stuffy transit in a jerky, dark railway-carriage, where she was constantly reminded by abrupt spurts of progress and sudden stops that they voyaged by ropeservice, Thea sank back in the padded grey travelling-carriage, which had been ordered to meet them, with a sense of relief. Then they rattled through the crowded London streets, where all faces looked worn, weary, or preoccupied—drove steadily through suburban roads, past villas and cottages, nursery gardens and fields. through the town of Richmond, into a There they stopped before the green door in the wall, and the coachman descended and rang the bell, Thea

noticed the festoons of ivy swaying against the red wall, even as Clifford had done but a short time ago.

The white-haired John appeared, bowed a grave welcome, spoke to the coachman about the luggage, and Dr. Biron and Thea passed along the brick path to the open door, where Miss Helme stood, dressed in her shot-silk gown, the mild face framed by the flowery cap slightly flushed.

"Welcome, my dear," she said kindly to Thea, holding the girl's gloved hand between her soft palms. Then she dropped a ceremonious, old-fashioned little curtsy to Dr. Biron, and led the way into the drawing-room. "Pray sit down," she said, dragging forward two of the white-covered, spindle-shanked chairs. "I am sure you must be tired after your journey. Dr.—Dr. Biron" (she gave another little curtsy), "you will need rest and refreshment. We shall dine in less than an hour. A spare room is at your service."

"Thank you, ma'am, but I must be off,"

said the doctor. "Patients—old friends—haven't seen them for years. Quite an event, my coming to town. The carriage will wait and take me back, ma'am, thanks to you all the same. Now about my little girl here." (He beamed first at Miss Helme, then at Thea.) "Upon my honour, I believe you will suit each other exactly."

Miss Helme drew herself up just a little, and forced a smile. Although she liked Althea at first sight, receiving "such a person"—not only receiving, but as it were taking the questionable artistic stranger to her bosom—was an awful sacrifice to make at the bidding of the heir of the Belmonts. She had been strengthening herself with the idea that she was a martyr to family duty, and to the noble virtue of gratitude, and therefore to hear herself lightly classed with Thea was a new and unexpected pang.

"I hope, Miss—Miss—Biron will find that I shall carry out Mr. Clifford's wishes

to the minutest point," she remarked, somewhat stiffly.

"Oh yes, of course—Clifford. Now, that is what I call a regular jolly good fellow," said the doctor, warmly. "Where is he? I must call on him, and get him to come and make a night of it with me. You see, Miss Helme, we fellows who are mewed up in the country let loose when we get into town, and can go the pace with the best of these young bloods;" and he gave one of his hearty, ringing laughs.

Miss Helme gasped. She had almost thrown up her hands with horror. "Mr. John Stuart Clifford is abroad," she said icily, emphasizing the names, in the endeavour to check "this dreadful man."

"Papa, dear," said Thea, abruptly, rising and putting her hand upon his shoulder, "would you mind my saying good-bye to you now? I know Miss Helme will kindly ask a maid to show me my room."

She spoke sweetly and deferentially of her new protectress, and Miss Helme's ruffled feelings were smoothed. "My dear, I will take you to your room myself, if Dr.—Dr. Biron will excuse me."

The doctor readily took the hint. Not only was he a little anxious to get the parting over-for he hated to see tears in Thea's eyes and dreaded that she would cry-but he liked the "old girl," as he mentally styled Miss Helme, scarcely more than she liked him. "My dear madam, I must be off," he said, rising; "and tomorrow I shall be able to tell our little runaway's dear mother that I have left her darling in clover.—Ah, it's well to be you, Bob. Close to the 'madding crowd,' yet, as you might say, buried in a country hermitage. Look there now, there's a garden for you" (waving his hand towards the window). "Beats mine, I assure you, ma'am, all to fits. Ah, young people weren't treated in this royal manner in my day!"

Thea blushed. Somehow her father seemed out of place in the old-fashioned, demure room, which, in spite of its small-

ness, looked stately and dignified. For, as we all know, a room has a bearing by the arrangement of its furniture, its colour, its draperies—as a person is stamped with a certain style by the fashion of his or her dress and the manner with which it is worn. Nowhere in the whole world would the handsome, jovial doctor have made himself a dwelling like this; the slim furniture "swaddled," as he contemptuously thought as he looked round, considering that "all the lot wouldn't fetch a ten-pun' note at a sale. But it does very well for a couple of women."

Meanwhile Thea asked Miss Helme how Mr. Clifford had arranged about her studies.

"To-morrow Herr Vogel will come here," said Miss Helme. "Then the next day we shall go to Belmont House, where you will practise with him before he is required by Lady Maud, who naturally, now that the season has commenced and she is at balls and parties every night, does not leave her room till late." Then she took the doctor's

proffered hand with the tips of her fingers, dropping a little curtsy; he embraced Thea, and Miss Helme and her new *protégée* were alone.

After the burly figure had passed the doorway, the two women involuntarily scanned each other. As Thea watched the thin but well-featured face of the slight. aging woman relapse from a certain prim severity of expression induced by the doctor's "free and easy" presence into its native worn and wan gentleness, she warmed towards her new guardian and companion with an emotion which was most like yearning pity. She saw weakness, prejudice, but tenderness stamped Helme's face; while Miss upon Miss Helme's sad, soft brown eyes dwelt, fascinated, upon the tall, slender young form, with the lofty, even proud bearing. Thea's fearlessness gave her a certain haughtiness of carriage, just as it lent an open, trustinspiring candour to those clear, inquiring eyes.

"I can trust her," thought the little spinster, with a sigh of relief. "I believe I shall love her," was Thea's mental comment. Then they both smiled. With the quick instinct of women guessing each other's sentiments, somehow they drew near and kissed each other.

Althea had the fatal gift of exciting emotional feeling in others. Miss Helme was not given to sudden flights of emotion, and disliked that demonstration which in these days is called "gush." Yet as she looked at the young girl confided to her care, with the strange beauty which was so peculiar and individual as to be possibly denied by some to be beauty at all, she felt a glow of tenderness, of sympathy; a little knot came in her throat, and before she was aware of it, the embrace was given and taken.

After that kiss they were no longer strangers. As Miss Helme led the way up the broad old staircase, and took Althea into the bedroom—the bower of white

dimity where faint odours of lavender and sweet herbs hung about the draperies, and where ivy quivered in the summer wind, knocking against the tiny lattice-panes of the open casement—she found herself talking to the girl as if she had known her for years, or as if she were at least some newly found relation in blood. "And this is Martha," she said, as the lanky figure unstrapping Thea's trunks turned, and Martha, the old-young housemaid, the "child" in the household, bobbed a curtsy, and her quaint, long face, with the big nose, reddened as she cast down her eyes, played with the corner of her apron, and looked inclined to giggle with nervousness. "Martha will brush your hair, and will try to learn to be quite your own little maid-won't you, Martha? You must let her dress you, you know, dear. And if you go out in the evening-But, of course, I forgot," she said, checking herself and speaking more severely. "Your object is study-hard study, I should hope."

"Indeed it is," said Thea, eagerly. And the earnest tone, her flash of enthusiasm at the very word, reassured her protectress. "But"—she hesitated and looked round—"I don't see the piano. I was to have one in my room, was I not?"

"Ah!" said Miss Helme, bridling with pleasure—she was actually beginning to enjoy all the little arrangements for her guest's well-being-"come with me, I will show you." Then she opened a baize door in the corridor; they mounted a flight of narrow stairs, pausing before a little door at the top. Unlocking this, Miss Helme pushed aside a heavy green curtain, and Althea stood where Clifford had stood and imagined the room as it now was. Walls and ceiling stained a pale brownish tint, while flooring—the beams, all visible woodwork, were dark, polished, shining; rugs, Persian or skins, scattered about; the window enlarged, its low seat cushioned, its handsome draperies caught back not to intercept the light; on one side, near the

fireplace in the corner, a low, comfortable green-velvet sofa; near it an equally low, cushioned reading-chair; opposite, a Broadwood piano of the newest upright shape; in the centre of the room, a writing-table with drawers and handsome ormolu fittings.

"And you—you have done all this for me!" said Althea, her eyes moistening with gratified surprise.

"I?" Miss Helme seemed astonished.
"Why, did not Mr. Clifford tell you? He took endless trouble about it. I told him he was a worse fidget than I or any other old maid. I should really believe he has the making of an old bachelor in him, did I not fancy otherwise."

Miss Helme spoke with the pride of being in the family confidence. She was arranging the writing paraphernalia on the table, and did not notice Thea's start and blush at the name "Clifford." Some sudden thrill—she knew not of what feeling—sent the blood to Thea's cheeks.

A second—sharp, painful—drove it back. She was deadly pale as she repeated inquiringly, "Otherwise?"

"I have a strong presentiment that sooner or later Mr. Clifford will marry his cousin, Lady Maud," began Miss Helme, warming to her favourite topic of the great family of which she was an offshoot. "I thought every one supposed it would be a natural consequence. Of course you know my cousin Mr. Clifford is the heir to the title and the entailed property. When his uncle dies, he will be Lord Belmont. What could be a better arrangement than his marrying Maud? The property would remain as it is, instead of being divided. For of course Lady Maud, the only child, must have a suitable dowry, whomsoever she might marry."

"But Lady Maud herself—does she wish it?"

"Wish it! My dear, you cannot know much of John Clifford if you can say such a thing." Then Miss Helme expatiated on the beauty, goodness, nobility of her hero. "Of course blood, race, is half the battle," she added. "Noblesse oblige; but in his case there is something more than what one expects from the son of his ancestors—the spirit of a ruler, the behaviour of one whose actions are apart from all individual considerations."

"He is certainly very generous," said Althea. But her eyes sought the floor. The carefully arranged room, with the comforts and luxuries, was bitter to her now. Why? "I certainly did not notice anything when I saw them together," she said, almost thinking aloud. "I mean Lady Maud—and—her cousin."

"My dear! as if Mr. Clifford and Lady Maud would behave as some labourer and his lass, a Jack with his Jill!"

"The man I am engaged to is named Jack," said Althea, flushing.

"I did not mean to offend you, dear. So then you, too, are engaged! Dear me! the young people nowadays seem to think of nothing else but courtship and getting married. It was different in my day." Little Miss Helme sighed. She, too, had her love-story. But she liked the idea of Althea being engaged. "You must tell me all about it, by-and-by," she said. Then a bell rang, and she glanced at her watch. "Dressing time already!" She was as-"Before we go down you must tonished. look at the books," she said; and she drew forward a Canterbury, full of handsomely bound volumes—a perfect prima donna's library. Here were pianoforte and vocal scores of the principal published operatic works of Mozart, Beethoven, Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, and the rest, with the oratorios of Handel, Haydn, the comparatively recent genius Mendelssohn, and others. On the covers "A. B." was neatly stamped in gilt letters.

Why had he done all this? Surely there was more than philanthropic interest displayed in that room! Althea thought and wondered as she dressed for dinner,

assisted by the nervous, lanky Martha; afterwards also, when she sat at the little dining-table, laid in humble imitation of the lordly board of Belmont House, and was ceremoniously entertained by her hostess, and waited upon by the old butler with hushed gravity, as if it were some state banquet; and later on, as she sat on a low stool beside Miss Helme in the bay window of the drawing-room, dreamily looking out upon the darkening lawn, where the flower-beds gleamed whitely in the deepening dusk, the quaint shapes of the yew teapots and birds growing black and grim against the evening sky. Miss Helme chattered freely as she plied her huge knitting-needles, her "blind man's holiday work," as she called the knitting she kept for twilight; and before Althea retired for the night, she had heard a good instalment of the Belmont family anecdotes. How Lord Belmont was the very counterpart of his ancestor, the first James; how he had chosen dear Lady Belmont from

one of the oldest families in the realm; how she was the cleverest, the dearest, etc., etc. What a pity it was they had not a son of their own! Yet who could complain, when they thought of that sweet, beautiful girl, Maud, who would possibly have for a husband one so admirable as Clifford, while still being wedded to one of her own Stuart blood!

After Miss Helme's harangue, Thea was so weary of the Stuart-Belmont topic, that had she been suddenly called upon to sing "Charlie is my Darling,"—"I should murder it," she thought, as, once in her room she dismissed Martha, and unbound her long hair herself. Then her hands fell at her sides. She felt more than weary,—troubled. She glanced at her reflection in the glass. The grieved expression softened her face; framed by her flowing hair, it was beautiful with a certain tender, resigned expression.

"I do not believe it," she said suddenly, and her face flamed as if a sudden light had shone upon it; then she hid it in her hands, half ashamed. What was it she did not believe? She knew well enough. Clifford's engagement to Maud. What had it to do with her? This was more difficult to answer. She was engaged to Jack-"and of course I love him, and mean to marry him," she stoutly asserted to herself. "Only—only—if he had been engaged, he ought scarcely to have troubled so much about me." Thea fancied she was arguing in a public spirit, from the standpoint of Lady Maud's rights, till it occurred to her that if Clifford, as a betrothed husband, should not have undertaken the arrangement of her affairs, neither should she, as a betrothed wife, have accepted his interference.

The more she thought the more entangled her ideas became. "Right or wrong, after he has been away six months, he will have forgotten all about me, and I shall have forgotten all about him," she resolved before she fell asleep.

Next day Vogel arrived to give the first lesson, curled, oiled, smiling, glossy. Helme received him in the drawing-room alone, having previously requested Althea to retire to her "study," as the room-Clifford's ideal room—was henceforth to be styled. The little lady had vague ideas that "music-masters" were a race apt to assume and encroach. (How much trouble had not been whispered to have accrued to "young girls in society" through their music-masters!) Therefore music-masters had to be sternly, with all politeness, "shown their place." So, when Vogel was solemnly ushered into the drawingroom, hat in hand, a huge bundle of music under one arm, Miss Helme, enthroned in the principal armchair, bowed as low a bow as she could attain to in the sitting posture without dislocating her neck, but did not rise or otherwise acknowledge Vogel's presence.

"Miss—Miss Biron?" said Vogel, inquiringly, pausing in the middle of the room, smiling profusely, and glancing 'round as if perplexed.

"I will take you to Miss Biron's study if you will be so good as to follow me," said Miss Helme, rising (work-basket prepared for the occasion in hand, for she rigidly decided to be with "that poor young thing"—simple lamb!—when possible wolves were abroad) and sedately conducting Vogel to the oak and green bower, where the white figure of Althea was flitting about, nervously clasping and unclasping her hands.

To Althea, the sight of Vogel suggested Clifford. As she welcomed her future teacher, she forgot her previous prejudice in his disfavour, and was unnerved. Vogel's shrewd eyes noted. But he had too much cunning to set down the girl's evident discomposure to this or that cause at once. He knew better. Besides, he had his own ideas—the first and foremost of which was, that Thea was a mine to be worked; and that, before working, it

was as well to know the position of the lodes.

"I hope they are all well at home?" he asked, as he shook hands with his new pupil with the air, half confidential, half patronizingly good-humoured, which he made use of to impress "young artists" with his own superiority, to endue them at once, so to say, with the right view of his important position in the musical world of London. "I am quite pleased to see you here, and so well lodged." He glanced round the room with some slight inward surprise. "You have indeed a gilded cage, sweet singing-bird."

"Mr. Clifford was good enough to interest himself in the matter," said Miss Helme, distantly, as she settled herself and her knitting-basket in a corner, where she could see everything that was going on. The innocent spinster introduced the potent name of Clifford to awe this "music-man," who was more familiar in his manner to Thea than she thought proper.

"Mr. Clifford is always chivalrous," observed Vogel, with a low bow and a peculiar smile.

Then he unpacked his parcel, Althea standing by, fighting her growing dislike to him by the reflection that she was to a certain extent at his mercy. "They"—her self-constituted patrons, Lord Belmont, Sir Robert, and Clifford—had, as it were, placed her in his hands. Offend Vogel, and he could ruin her. So she controlled herself—and her demeanour, as she stood by his side and sang her scales according to his direction, was as docile as if he had been a Handel or a Beethoven.

But the notes, as they floated into the summer air, had a plaintive, hurried sound. Miss Helme, interested, strangely touched, watched the fair girl who stood there, looking so pretty, so appealing, her rounded chin uplifted, her thoughtful profile clear against the shadow on the wall. Her voice was beautiful, but so heart-rending. "Something is going wrong

with that love-affair of hers," decided Miss Helme, beginning to knit energetically. "I must take it in hand, and see what I can do. Very likely the young man disapproves of this professional notion, and most properly resents it. I am not at all sure that I shall not uphold him."

Vogel was noticing the melancholy tone, the ill-concealed listlessness with which Althea studiously attempted to follow his hints—his interpretation of her manner different to Miss Helme's. But his thoughts were scarcely represented by his words, when Martha came into the room and approached her mistress with a letter on a salver, and Althea suddenly stopped singing and blushed furiously. She had seen that the letter had foreign stamps—was thin.

"Ah! I was wondering why your voice sounded so poor and miserable," he said jocosely. "Now I know. We are—what do you English call 'Heimweh'?—homesick. Pray go" (he executed a little

flourish on the key-board); "I will wait. 'See what the good papa, the good mamma, have to say to their pet."

"It is from Mr. Clifford," said Miss Helme, fluttered with delight, gingerly breaking the seal, unfolding the sheet, and holding it from her, her hand shading her "'Mentone'—dear me! he is at eyes. Mentone already. 'My dear Miss Helme,' -h'm, h'm!-' heat intense; foolish not to stay north till autumn is more advanced'—h'm, h'm!—'the south dulness Remember visit to you and our little discussions and disagreements about arrangements with regret'-h'm, 'wish I were there now.' I am quite astonished that Mr. Clifford should have gone south; I thought he was bound for Norway," said Miss Helme, glancing up. She had little expected to be promoted to be the confidence of the heir-apparent, and was triumphant accordingly. "'You will doubtless be surprised to hear I have not voyaged in the advised direction '—did

I not say so?—'but'—h'm, 'I have felt too listless and inert to encounter frosty' mornings and sharp breezes. I think I shall go to Venice. But, in any case, write at once here, and let me know whether that fool of a bookbinder came to his senses at last, and chose to understand what I meant by the initials being in plain Latin type, instead of those hieroglyphic abortions his soul delighted in. Believe me, dear Miss Helme'—h'm! Dear me! there is a postscript."

Thea's eyes greedily watched the sheet. Vogel, absently playing soft snatches with the soft pedal down, noted all—the absorption of the recipient of the letter, the agitation of his pupil.

"'P.S.,'" slowly read Miss Helme.
"'By the way, Miss Biron will be with you now. How do you get on together? Has she sung at Belmont House yet?' All so like dear Mr. Clifford," observed Miss Helme, rapturously refolding the thin sheet. "But, pray, do not let me disturb the lesson."

"Ah! Come, this is better," said Vogel, smiling to himself, as Althea applied herself energetically to her solfeggi, and her voice rang out, pure, clear, buoyant. "Very good-very good indeed," he condescendingly admitted as, the lesson over, he took his leave. "I shall be quite anxious to hear you to-morrow in the picture-gallery at Belmont House." And he went away, amused and busy, his appetite whetted as that of a ferret who has scented rats. He had scented a petite comédie, the actors being Clifford, Lady Maud, and Thea. "We are smitten with this country bumpkin, this pretty little piece of candour," he mused. "Just because it is not to be had; at least, not without sacrifice, and we are not of the stuff they use to make martyrs of. Meanwhile all my Lady Maud's airs and graces and fastidiousness and proud beauty count for nothing. We would rather have a raw turnip out of somebody else's field than the ripest peach from our own garden

wall. I know! I have seen enough of it among these titled fools." His scowl was scarcely pleasant to look at. "I have seen the beginning, the middle, the end; and here will be a repetition of the old story, the blot on the age, strong vice strangling weak virtue—with one exception. If I, Vogel, don't get something out of it, let me die a pauper." And no bitterer self-threat ever escaped the fervid lips of an Israelite.

Next morning, after much preparation and fuss, Miss Helme and Thea started in a fly from the Peacock Inn for Belmont House. Miss Helme was too agitated at the prospect of what was literally her reintroduction among her lofty relations, to pay more attention to Thea than to advise her to put a light shawl over her white dress "to keep off the dust," and to ask her spasmodically from time to time if she were comfortable. Althea's chaperone, whose toilette for the occasion had cost her many pangs of uncertainty and much anxious

deliberation, had pronounced the girl's costume, after minutely inspecting it with her glasses on, to be "quite proper."

"You see, my dear, in your peculiar position you must be very careful," she observed, as she pulled out the crumpled edge of a frill here, smoothed a fold there. "Of course, this practising with Herr Vogel at Belmont House is a great concession for Lord and Lady Belmont to make. They are generous, but that is the very reason one should not take advantage of their generosity. Were you to go there dressed like Lady Maud, it would be the height of bad taste. But this white piqué is just as it should be. I do not suppose Maud has ever seen one, unless her maid happens to have one for an afternoon gown, so that no one can accuse you of not exactly recognizing your social status." Then she had kindly patted Thea's shoulder.

What did it all mean? thought the girl, passionately, as she leant back on the grey cushions of the Peacock "fly" and watched

the tall elms, the market-gardens, the cottages, flit by as if she were in a dream. Why, was the fierce cry of her whole being—why had Miss Helme taken her into her house? Why had Lord Belmont arranged for her to have her singinglessons there? Why was she to be careful not to dress like Lady Maud (she hated her white piqué at this moment with a bitter hatred)? And, beyond and above all, why had Clifford taken so much trouble about her? Why had he "bothered" to such an extent about the furniture of her room, her piano, her books, Vogel? "There is something more in it all than I know," she slowly determined. "Since I came here to London—I have felt that I am worse than ignorant, that I have not even the cleverness to see what passes before my No wonder very eyes. Poor mother! she spoke hardly of 'the world.' It has hurt her, I expect, and it will hurt me. I let it," blazed out her wild nature—"if I do not rally myself, and learn, learn, learn.

I have everything to learn! And till I know more, I will not try to answer these 'whys.' That is the most sensible determination to make." Then she excepted one point. She believed that to-day she should return to "The Retreat" enlightened as to Lady Maud's feeling for Clifford. "If she loves him, she will not be able to conceal it," she thought; "and if I see her, I shall know."

"Are you comfortable, dear?" finally asked Miss Helme, with anxious energy, as they drove through a side street, one of the inlets to the great square. "There is Belmont House."

Thea looked out and saw a great brick frontage, with many windows and a ponderous door, which seemed to glide back as the "fly" drew up before it. Then Miss Helme gingerly alighted, taking care that her light kid gloves should be kept from possibly soiling surfaces; and Thea followed her up the steps, through a dimly lighted, chequered-paved entrance

hall, and up the wide staircase. glanced around, where tapestried pictures of shepherds and shepherdesses and rustic dancers in sylvan scenes were let into the white and gilded walls, and noticed that the rails of the balustrades were of velvet, and that no footfall, however heavy, could be heard upon the thick pile of the crimson stair-carpet. They passed along the corridor, the side of which seemed one huge mirror, and through the ball-room. This, a wide, lofty room, was decorated "after" a salon The white-and-gold Tuileries. in the ceiling, from which hung several glittering crystal chandeliers, was carved in richly arabesqued medallions. The walls were as so many huge frames containing more tapestry pictures. To the right a large alcove lined with gleaming mirrors was railed off for musicians, and filled with white-and-gold music-desks; and the floor was of shining parquetry. Some men were polishing the upper end with padded roller-brooms and with their slippered

feet. There was to be a dance to-morrow, for, although this was "out of the season," some aspect of political matters kept many people in town.

"The picture-gallery," said Miss Helme, as they emerged into a long chamber, divided by white-and-gold pillars, the numbers of pictures of all sizes on its walls lighted by a skylight. Two marble fire-places broke the monotony of the picture vista. Amber-satin couches were ranged along the sides; oblong and round cushioned seats were studded about the floor. At the opposite end of the gallery, just in front of a long pale picture, a sad "Crucifixion" by Raphael, was a grand piano. Hovering about this was Vogel.

As the powdered footman, their conductor, retired through a small door in the wall, Vogel advanced and did the honours with a "quite at home" manner. He was accustomed to wait, he said. He never knew whether Lord Belmont was

"coming down" or no. And Lady Maud was also uncertain. "Which is quite natural in a charming young lady in her position," he remarked, sorting his music. "How beautiful she is!" (rapturously) "That Greuze" (pointing to a simpering beauty on the walls in an impossible attitude) "is just a little like her; but how inferior! Poor Greuze! If he had had such a model!" (a sigh). "But we must not waste our time—let us to work." Then, with a sharp glance at Althea, he seated himself at the piano.

He had said quite enough, he considered, to discompose the girl, if there were anything serious between her and Clifford—because Miss Helme had spoken truly when she said that the family marriage-arrangement was pretty generally expected. "Nothing like admiration of a rival to bring out a woman's sentiments," thought Vogel.

When Althea sang calmly, clearly, her very best, the schemer was puzzled. He

meant to be the Mephisto in this affair of one Faust and two Margheritas. Maud (Margherita the first) had strengthened this idea yesterday, when he had happened to meet her at the pianoforte recital of a lingering foreign virtuoso, and had casually alluded to Althea as "our young friend of Elfield, who was staying with Miss Helme—surely a connection of the family?" seemingly expecting Maud the magnificent to be interested.

Seemingly—for he was by no means surprised when Maud started, blushed, and then remarked, with assumed carelessness, "What, that girl come to town? What for?"

And he had deferentially explained that Lord Belmont, Sir Robert, and others thought she had a wonderful voice. He could say nothing of his opinion—it signified but little, naturally, when these were agreed upon the point—but at all events he was to study with her. "It was so considerate of Lord Belmont. Three

times a week she was to practise in the gallery——"

"And sing with papa, I suppose," had sneered Maud. "I believe he would endow a scullery-maid, if she could sing duets with him."

At which Vogel had dropped his eyes and simpered—his rule when he wished to convey no meaning whatever—and had assisted the lady to sweep into her carriage, a manœuvre she had executed with more scorn of her surroundings than usual.

Margherita the first had shown him her cards. Therefore when Margherita the second—as he designated Thea—did not fall at his first verbal shot, he was taken aback. "She will need careful treatment," he thought. He had underrated her moral force. But he thought better of her in consequence, and practised away with a will—more and more astonished each minute at her earnestness and aptitude. It was new to him to have hints understood and adopted—to have nothing to explain.

"You will do well if you go on like this, Miss Biron," he said, as they finished a celebrated aria; and he brought out a duet which Lord Belmont had asked him to practise with her. Then he explained that the earl liked singing duets.

"Has he a voice?" asked Thea, aston-ished.

"Well," said Vogel, "he likes singing. In fact, it is his one great idea. Of course his voice is a little worn. You must not be surprised." All of which he said meaningly, hoping she would understand. If he were to smile when Lord Belmont launched into his feeble warble—those abortive sounds which were such unfailing amusement to his intimate friends-he might lose a valuable pupil; all his "Faust and Margherita" plots might come to an untimely end. His hint was given just in time. A moment more, and the side-door opened, and Lady Maud strode in—her large walk was more of a stride than anything else—and sailed grandly up to the piano.

She was a pyramid of floating, delicate muslin. Those intricate embroideries and artistic bunches of ribbons were dazzling to feminine eyes. Then her small head was so carefully suited by her hairdresser. rich plaits of shining dark hair looked loose and careless, though they clove to her head, darkly framing that oval face with the soft, peach-like skin. Maud had a wide, well-shaped forehead, upon which Nature had traced her arched eyebrows so that they stood in relief, and lent a winning expression to her large, somewhat vacuous eyes. As Thea looked up and saw this image of winning, if trivial, beauty, she swiftly compared, and her heart sank. If Clifford saw them together, thus (how countrified, rough, unkempt, she felt herself beside this aristocratic damsel!), even his kindly interest in her -if it were nothing more than that, would be lessened.

"How do?" Maud nodded carelessly to Thea; then said somewhat haughtily to Vogel, who rose as she entered, "I am going to ride in an hour. I suppose you can hear me now?"

"Of course," said Vogel, smiling. "At any time, only too happy to be Lady Maud's serviteur." He removed Thea's music from the desk. "You can wait?" he asked her, with an appealing glance.

Thea bowed her head gravely. Lady Maud was opening letters, her fingers gleaming with jewels as she scanned her correspondence and tossed the open sheets upon the piano; then she turned and stared as Miss Helme came towards her with extended hands.

- "My dear Maud, this is indeed a happy moment" (sentimentally); "it has been so long, so long."
- "I beg your pardon," said Lady Maud, as if puzzled. She did not choose to remember this person, cousin or no cousin, who was evidently instrumental in bringing "that girl about the place."
 - "Last time I saw you was in the school-

room—you were only so high," continued Miss Helme, plaintively.

"Oh yes; I think I remember you now. You are Miss Cormack's sister. Poor Miss Cormack! I hope she is well."

Miss Helme recoiled in horror. To be mistaken for the sister of a governess! "I am his lordship's second cousin once removed," she said, overwhelmed.

Maud bowed. "I hope you will stay to luncheon," she said. "But you will kindly excuse me now. I ride at one, and I have to sing first." Then she turned to the piano, and began her scales as calmly as if she and Vogel were alone.

Thea walked slowly to the end of the gallery, and was gazing at a rare Correggio, locked away under glass, when Miss Helme came up.

"Dear girl! Her self-possession is so admirable," she remarked, "and her voice is very good—of course not like yours" (as an unusually sharp cracked note echoed along the gallery), "but quite what one would wish in her position in society. And her gown—so tasteful! so suitable to her beauty."

"She is very handsome," said Thea, with a sigh. Then she turned, hearing voices, and saw Lord Belmont coming through the ballroom, with a short man who walked like a dancing-master, whose shining bald head was fringed with grey hair, whose face was not unlike the pronounced physiognomy assigned to Punch—Punch in his most amiable mood.

"Welcome to London, Miss Biron." The tall figure of Lord Belmont seemed to tower above them, as his close-set dark eyes fixed themselves upon Thea, with the peculiar expression of greedy intensity which his enemies—and being a rich nobleman he had plenty—chose as a nail to hang their fantastic theories to his discredit upon. "How are you, Miss Helme? Glad to see you here again." Then he took Althea aside. "It is most fortunate you happened to be here," he said confidentially. "This

funny little man is quite an authority—a motive power in the world of music. He is the director of the 'Universal Concerts,' and all the musical fools accept his opinion as gospel. You must sing to him.—Professor, this is the young artist I spoke of.
—Miss Biron—Professor Barra. Professor—Miss Biron."

The little man bowed with his lavender-kid-gloved hand on his coat. Then, with a broad smile, and a twinkle of his shrewd little eyes, he said—snapping out his words in a peculiar, emphatic way—"When his lordship introduces an artist to me, I expect much. And I am seldom disappointed. His lordship is a most fastidious judge."

"Maud, Maud!"—"his lordship" made a wry face and held up his hands, at which signal there was a sudden lull of voice and accompaniment—"my dear girl, you are singing detestably out of tune."

"Am I, papa?" Maud looked at her advancing parent placidly. "I expect it is the weather." She had "shown that

girl her place" by coolly turning her from the instrument, and that was all she cared for. Indeed, she was glad of the interruption, which would set her free from further exertion. She would have time now to dress for her ride. "Of course, now you enthusiasts have appeared, my practice is over for the morning," she said languidly, acknowledging the professor with a slight nod. "You know my music is quite small—an insignificant affair—"

"Pardon me." The professor advanced within the (to him) charmed circle that divided the daughter of a peer from "the common herd." "Nothing that Lady Maud does could possibly be insignificant. Pray continue, my dear young lady. Were I not to hear you sing this morning, I should have missed a point in my musical life, I can assure you. To come here by chance, to find you at the piano, and for you not to sing for me, there would be something wanting." Then the professor

dipped into the reservoir of general complimentary platitudes that he constantly kept at hand for his special band, the high and mighty. The professor made his living by "artists"—otherwise, creatures born with a natural aptitude for music, and with sufficient ambition to labour through the necessary drudgery (creatures who had, according to their status, to be "kept down"),—and by the great—people moneyed or titled, or, very haply, both. These last were the ticket-buyers and the shedders of a glamour which should entice the middle public, the "daily bread" people. But glamour-shedders had to be fed with the manna of a subtly administered flattery. The professor, albeit born the humble offspring of an insignificant provincial tradesman, felt "at one" with England's nobility. His flattery was no flattery in so far that he was in He heartily believed in his earnest. mission — to repress the arrogance of "that unlettered set, selfish to the backbone," viz. "the artists;" to allure those without whom music must collapse and expire—those with handles to their names and with money in their pockets—and by the juncture of these two to effect a public. A public, which also included those unmoneyed ones who ape their superiors and follow them as asses follow bunches of carrots; those who are authorities among their friends because they affect to be "somebodies" in the musical world; and those who have nothing to do, and follow anything or anybody, agape, half unconsciously, as steel filings cleave to the magnet.

These were the professor's puppets, which he manipulated with a shrewd skill worthy a nobler cause—if, indeed, any cause adulterated with the natural selfishness of humanity can be rightly called "noble."

Maud, well knowing that the professor cared as little to hear her sing as to hear a dog bark at him, still liked his flattery, somehow. The very fact that he did flatter, and that he would hear her sing, were acts of homage. So she sang, Vogel clenching his teeth as her acid notes stung his ears; Miss Helme wrapt in fatuitous admiration on one of the amber-satin couches; Althea grave and silent; Lord Belmont, slightly impatient, having his eye on a duet in one of his crimson morocco operatic volumes; the professor standing, his lavender hands folded upon his hat, his head on one side, like an ancient but alluring cuckoo.

"Beautiful! That is a favourite air of mine" (from the professor); "Oh, dear gifted girl!" (from Miss Helme); and "I told you you were out of voice, my dear. Oh, you are going? Then tell your mother I want her to hear Miss Biron sing" (from Lord Belmont).

Then Maud gracefully swept away, her calm face placid, her mind surging with annoyance. "But, at least, I managed that," she consoled herself, triumphantly.

"That" was, that as she left them she

had stood close to Althea, folding one of her letters, at the top of which was "My dearest Maud" in Clifford's handwriting. Thea, without thinking, her gaze fascinated by the sparkle of Lady Maud's rings, had seen those words. Paling, sickening, her eyes, startled, grief-full, had met Maud's. As the noble lady swept away, the "young artist's" nature was pierced, riven with shafts of a strange torment. The pictures she gazed at, the voices she heard during that new, swift agony, she would never for-It was as if she were on the rack. get. Then reaction came to the rescue. sudden strength raged in her being.

"Now for our duet, Miss Biron. Vogel tells me you have tried it with him." Lord Belmont was bending over her, graciously eager for the musical fray. His keenest pleasure in life, now that the relish of youth was a thing of the past, was to hear his own voice, particularly in juxtaposition with another—the finer the better. For this he courted prime donne—with the

drawback of being called "an old sinner" by the sharp, but in his case ignorant, conclusionists. For this he ran up long bills for extraneous jewellery, and gave private concerts that figured among the thousands in his year's outlay. For this he had encouraged Althea, and had risked the growth of what he really believed to be "an amiable weakness" of Clifford's—of the nephew, his heir—whom he intended to be Maud's husband. No wonder his face grew dark and his eyes contracted disagreeably when Althea declared herself unable to sing a duet.

"I will sing a solo, if you like, my lord," she said gently, but firmly.

At this juncture Lady Belmont blandly, but with an air of grand concession which was not encouraging to contradiction, sailed into the gallery, saluting and speaking a gracious word to each. "I was very busy, but whenever a working woman is in question, I waive all other claims," she assured Thea, in her clarion tones. "I

hope you are careful to keep our young friend 'up to the point'?" she continued to Miss Helme, seating herself by her upon an ottoman. "You see, girls of this sort are so apt to lose sight of their vocationwork;—the good example to the females of the lower classes—and to be led away. I am so pleased that this young girl, in whom dear Sir Robert and Lady Manners are so interested, is with you. I hope she appreciates your kindness in taking her into your house. I am pleased to see a proper modesty in her dress. That promises well" (scanning Althea through her eyeglass). "Very nice indeed, simple, quite as it should be."

To Althea, Lady Belmont's manner was the "last straw." First Miss Helme's allusion to her dress, her social inferiority, during the drive; then Lady Maud's behaviour; Vogel's setting her, Althea, aside; the difference in the professor's treatment of herself and the noble lady; the strange sharp shock of seeing "My dearest Maud" in Clifford's handwriting; Lord Belmont's annoyance because she did not at once fall in with his whim—no wonder that her pale cheeks were crimson, that her eyes flashed, as she took her place at the piano.

"She is in a passion—not a passion, a violent rage," thought Vogel. "Scenes" were not included in his schemes. He considered them hopeless, irremediable mistakes. "If you do not feel inclined to sing, say so, and I will manage to excuse you," he said in an undertone, playing a few careless flourishes. "If you are nervous, agitated, this is not the place to show it."

"I am neither the one nor the other." Althea spoke firmly. To be recalled to self-possession by Vogel! It nettled her. She thought with self-anger that if now, here, before these few persons, she could not control herself, subdue emotion, abstract her mind, how could she face crowds, all perhaps possible enemies, in the future?

"If I cannot bear these stings," she said to herself, with a vague feeling they were but the mild beginning of her difficulties, "I am unworthy to go on—to be an artist at all. I had better go back, hide my head at home, and confess that Jack is right—that there is my place, my vocation."

"What will you sing?" Vogel was turning over her music, while the professor was amiably discoursing to Lady Belmont, Lord Belmont standing by with an abstracted frown.

"None of those." Thea spoke almost contemptuously, as Vogel turned over the morsels of operatic warbling they had practised the day before. "This or nothing." She suddenly caught sight of "Stabat Mater" at the back of one of Lord Belmont's volumes, seized it, and placed it before Vogel, open at the "Inflammatus."

"My dear young lady, you must be mad. It will be months before you will be able to sing this properly." "Then make my excuses." Thea was turning from the piano.

"Do as you please. But I warn you, if you make a bad impression upon the professor, you are injuring your future prospects. He will talk—how he will talk! and all his people believe in him."

But in the strange, strong conviction—one of those whirlwinds of wild will which had urged or controlled Thea at times since babyhood—Vogel's rapid, low-toned expostulation was lost, as a human cry in a shricking hurricane. She pointed to the commencing accompaniment, and Vogel, surprised into acquiescence, controlled by a superior force, obeyed and began to play.

"Good gracious, whatever is she about?" thought Lord Belmont, as Vogel, annoyed with her, dashed more spiritedly than was his wont into the rapid chords. Then he started, amazed; and the professor stopped short in the middle of one of his anecdotes, which he was delivering for the enlighten-

ment of Lady Belmont and Miss Helme. stared. A passionate note was launched into the air—a sublime cry that echoed through the gallery—as if some supernatural voice had suddenly cried "Hold!" Then the solemn Latin words of declamatory anguish came forth from Thea's lips. It was a strange moment to bring those few assembled worldlings face to face with the terrible tale of the mother's woe. of the Son's agony-to drive each cruel memory straight to their minds, as the very nails clove the rugged wood of the cross. It was as if a corpse had been suddenly brought and laid in the midst of a merry crowd. First, they flinched, hushed; then their eyes instinctively sought the great picture against which Thea's fair head and rapt face stood in relief, as if she were the sorrowing narrator of the horrors that had frozen the holy, pale features above into the expression of awful patience. As she sang, she was mentally far away-far back, indeed, in the annals

of humanity, in imagination facing the dread tragedy where slight individual tortures shrank and disappeared as snowflakes in a furnace, and casting her trouble into the great fire of an incomprehensible, because Eternal, suffering—the fire whose huge flames warmed her soul, chilled by contact with human icicles. The "Inflammatus" over, Thea was calmed, peaceful. Her disturbed mood had left her, and had seemingly betaken itself to her audience; for perplexity and emotion were visible on the various faces. Vogel alone looked The great tale meant notriumphant. thing to him; therefore he could more thoroughly appreciate its effect upon the "She knows what she is about," he thought, involuntarily winking at the key-board as he played the concluding chords.

"Did I not say so?" was Lord Belmont's speech that broke upon the astonished silence. He looked round. No one knew what he had said, or what he meant,

exactly—but no one cared. Miss Helme, religious to a fault, was nervously subduing her emotion, and wondering whether "the dear girl had judged correctly in choosing so very serious a song just then." Lady Belmont rose and said, in her loud emphatic way, "I am quite sure our young friend should sing in oratorios, Herr Vogel. She will make a sensation at Exeter Hall."

"Genius, my lord, genius," said the oracle, Professor Barra, in an undertone to Lord Belmont. "The sort of thing, you know, that makes you say black is white till you are in your sober senses again, and are ashamed of yourself." Still, the professor was scarcely so debonnair and insouciant (as he himself would have termed his normal butterfly mood) as was his wont. The power which had excited religious ardour in Miss Helme, had appealed to the hard good sense of Lady Belmont, had astonished his lordship, and established Althea in Vogel's estimation,

made the professor uneasy and uncomfortable, he knew not why.

"My dear child, I can see that you and I will understand each other perfectly," was Miss Helme's effusive speech, as, after Lord Belmont had conducted Thea to the Peacock "fly," and the two ladies were ensconced therein and driving home, the little spinster was betrayed into an unusual ebullition of emotion. She embraced the girl, and her eyes filled with tears.

Althea said, "Thank you; you are very kind," gratefully, almost humbly. But she shrank into herself. Such sympathy was worse than none. What could Miss Helme know of the inward tempest that had produced the gleam of lightning which had dazzled them? Was it not that lady's peculiar meanness, her submission to Maud's insolence, and abject worship of the Belmonts that had largely helped to produce the desperate mood necessary to give birth to even a moment of "divine frenzy"?

This imagining on Miss Helme's part

that she and Althea "understood one another" was a fresh pain. The girl subsided into her corner, nor did she speak, except in reply, until they reached home.

Then, had she been a few years older, worn and wasted by continual fiery impressions from within and from without, she might have sunk into the pale mists of reactionary exhaustion—have lain, feeling nothing, below thought, inaccessible to incentives to effort. But she was young; her nerves, intricate and delicate though they might be, were strong in their hard elasticity. No sooner alone, than the emotions of the morning returned with redoubled force, and raged. Disgust at the sycophancy of the professor, Vogel, and Miss Helme; contempt for Lord Belmont's airy selfishness; a keen, sharp sensation—hate or jealousy, she knew not which—when she thought of Maud; rage, longing, revenge—for Clifford. Clifford! The very name seemed to still the tide in

her veins. Why? She thought of each minute that she had seen and known him, from the first to the last (with what cruel keenness she remembered every word, each look and expression!), alternately softening with a regretful admiration and hardening with a fierce resentment.

"How dared he pursue me, come to me, look at me, make me——"

She suddenly recoiled—as one, coming upon an unexpected precipice cut sheer away from a grassy, flowery path, would shrink in horror confronted with black, hideous depths. For a minute she covered her eyes with her hands; then, sobered, resolute, she opened them and confronted her life. She knew she loved him. —thank God for that !—the cruel parasite such a feeling would be, had not fastened upon the roots of her being as There was still time—"time to yet. work, to fill my mind with my art, to get strong," she feverishly wailed. Then she turned from the vague to the actual.

practised with ardent energy till the time beyond which Vogel had cautioned her not to sing had fully expired. Then she took down a volume of thorough-bass and experimented upon a few problems. When the dressing-bell rang, she had subsided into the student whose energies are focused by the work in hand, whose eyes are like the mind within, concentrated, placid.

After their dinner, during which Miss Helme chattered incessantly about the "dear Belmonts," Thea made an excuse, and wrapping herself in a shawl, stole out into the garden. She had a craving to be alone, under the vast sky—she, to whom the open world had been as familiar and home-like as to the wild birds, or to those inaccessible creatures, the wise insects. As she trod the crackling gravel path, the weird shapes of the clipped trees—the yew birds and teapots—loomed blackly against the moonlit sky; as she noiselessly fled across the dewy grass-plat

into the shadow, bats flimmered across the glowing red drawing-room window, through which she could see Miss Helme bending over her work, and the old butler stepping staidly across the floor to close the shutters. Then they hasped with a clang. The red window was black as a closed eye—and she was alone, under the cold moon, in the free, pure air.

Alone! There had been moments when to realize absolute solitude had been horror—when that solitude had excited vague terrors, forcing her to seek the companionship of creatures, however low in the scale of life. The scared child, possessed with thoughts a mature brain finds too strong to be borne, had fled for refuge to her simple boy-friend Jack, to the rustic servants, even to the very animals—a soul haunted by unknown influences, seeking its earthly lair. But desperation, the height of possible emotion, annihilates fear. To find herself alone, with nothing between herself and the great worlds rolling and

turning in the steadiness of space but thin atmosphere, was at this moment an actual relief.

And how utterly alone! The girl-heart beating strongly in the slender form felt itself as isolated as any poor creature cast upon an uninhabited island. Some fearful truth—she hardly knew what, as yet—had forced itself upon her to-day. She felt that these people among whom she was, and was to be, were entirely different to herself. She glanced rapidly at them, as if they were drawn up for inspection before her on the moonlit lawn, seeing them one by one. What were they? What were they for? What was their life all about? These were her vague questions. and Lady Belmont-Miss Helme-Vogel —the professor. "They do not seem real," she mused. Lady Maud's aggressive pride was better, because it was actualit could be felt. At this instant Thea felt almost grateful to Maud because she could understand her, even making excuses

for the noble beauty's natural insolence, because it was true, not feigned. "But the others seem to me to be acting life," she said to herself, "and not acting it well or completely. They have not made up their minds as to what the character they want to be is exactly, so their ways and manners don't fit; they shift and gape, like badly made clothes, and now and then you catch sight of the actual person underneath. A lesson for me when I am throwing myself into the characters I shall have to assume. Let me not look one look of theirs, think one thought, speak one speech, before I know them through and through." For Althea had to feel herself the person she represented before she could utter their supposed emotions. Unknowingly, she had long since found the key to the chamber of interpretations.

Yet she remained herself, individual, true. To-night she would indulge in no self-deception. She faced the naked hideousness of her human nature courageously, unflinchingly. She knew what her inclinations were—to "give it all up" and go back. "To be petted and smoothed till my impulses are polished down to be mere reflectors!" she said bitterly to herself. "Better stay here and blunder. Of course I shall blunder, and offend every one all round. It was almost a miracle that I got through without doing so to-day. Better stay here—for Jack's sake. I love him dearly" (at the thought of his plain face, softened by love, her eyes filled with tears); "but not as I ought to, if I marry him." Bending her head with the strange shame she felt whenever her thoughts approached the subject of Clifford, she confessed to herself that before that man her whole being knelt. "There must be something extraordinary about him," she explained to herself, as many have explained to themselves before her, and will explain again; "there must be. What else could it be?" She had yet to learn the bitterest lesson of life, perhaps its most cruel mystery, that though the human being may control—ay, and control to a nicety his actions and his thoughts, he seems placed as an open book on the wayside of life for each passing emotion to scrawl its name upon. "But what is all this-what should human beings be to me-when I have felt myself called upon to be something, when I have powers that I ought to use?" were the words she, as it were, hurled at herself in passionate anger. should stand apart, too absorbed in my life-work to heed my surroundings, as a rock among the waves." With the thought a steady power seemed to rise up within her, as the very ghost from the grave of smothered inclination—a power that stilled her with a cool grasp, as if it said, "You are mine. You have to obey. You have to work, to suffer, to succeed."

She shivered. At that moment a large bird flew out from the shrubs behind her, and flew heavily into the moonlight and away, with a sharp, sad cry. It seemed to her as if her wishes, her natural human wishes, had left her like this poor bird left his covert, with a strangled wail. As she slowly, almost apathetically, returned to the house, she felt as if she had signed, sealed, and delivered her will to a superior power. From this moment she would belong to the vocation she had chosen, and to it alone.

CHAPTER III.

CHRISTMAS.

SUMMER was past, autumn had come and waned, an unusually rigorous winter had The garden and the landscape set in. seen from Althea's window were wrapt in a thick white cloak of fluffy, glistening snow, through which the trees seemed to have pricked their way like iron spikelets, bearing their white trophies ahead. the warm, cosy "study," as Thea's room was called by the household, the young singer worked away with a will, while the dancing flames from the crackling, spirting logs on the little hearth played upon the music on the desk, and made a dozen tiny fires kindle and shimmer in the dark polished wood of the piano. She worked, as she had worked through the autumn, steadily, confidently, thoughtfully; and Vogel, who came and went frequently, grew more and more absorbed in his charge. As the weeks went quietly by, he began to "pin his faith" upon her, and, shrewd and cautious as he was, to believe that here was the chance to "make all their fortunes."

Thea threw her whole force into her work. If she sang a scale, no tone was slurred or brought out without consideration. Before she began to study an operatic part, she not only fathomed the character she was to represent, and grasped the various and succeeding "situations," but she came to the letter of the work with its spirit dominating her mind. She had traced the story to its well-spring, and had considered its nationality and its separate significance. Interest grew as she proceeded. That which was tiresome and tedious at first became habitual, and delicious because "a second nature." When Vogel began his

lessons, the work was more than half accomplished by Althea herself in her rigid application. Passions, impulses, hopes, fears, waxed pale for lack of food, all the girl's energy being daily absorbed by the work on hand; and Thea, out of working hours, might have been any ordinary young lady, in her exhaustion finding a little knitting and gossip with Miss Helme a congenial relaxation from its very emptiness. So the two, chaperone and chaperoned, got on together very well through those long winter months, Miss Helme priding herself that "the dear girl had certainly felt the influence she had tried to exert, and would in time, in spite of the drawbacks of her parentage, be quite a perfect specimen of a young English girl."

Belmont House was shut up, so the lessons could not be given there. Lord and Lady Belmont and Lady Maud had, as usual, spent the autumn months in Scotland, where Lord Belmont rented a deer forest; and, after a sojourn at their famous

estate in the Midland counties, had finally adjourned to their place on the eastern coast. Of Clifford nothing had been heard at "The Retreat," except that he was at Algiers—a bit of intelligence casually administered by Vogel.

Letters were interchanged between Althea, her mother, and Jack weekly. Towards Christmas the longings for the prodigal's return were so forcibly expressed, that almost as a matter of course Thea found herself journeying homewards on Christmas Eve.

It was a bitterly cold day. After reaching Blackwall by train, Thea joined the boat, at once proceeding to the cabin, where she wrapped herself in her rugs in a corner, and subsided into a delicious anticipation. After the months of self-rule aud self-repression, this home-going was luxurious expansion. As the cold waves lapped against the steamer's side, as the snow-covered shore seemed to glide by the round cabin windows as a smooth accom-

paniment to the throbbing, measured pants of the engine, Thea revelled in the idea of once more being her old self, of lapsing unconsciously into the past through the warm welcome she knew was awaiting her.

"Ease her! stop her!" The boy's shrill cry made her start up, collect her rugs, hurry on deck. The engines were reversed, the passengers were crowding at the side; they were steadily nearing land. Her strained, anxious eyes grew misty as she saw the group on the pier—the dogs, leaping and yelping as if they knew whom they were awaiting, the tall broad form of Dr. Biron, and, bending forward, stout and strong, the figure of Jack.

How she first saw them, how she passed the gangway, was embraced by father and lover, leapt upon by the dogs, placed in the dog-cart, wrapped round, talked to, and driven onwards, Thea never knew. She seemed called out of a torpid stupor by the inroads of the keen fresh air, as they drove through the well-known lanes, past the familiar farmhouses and cottages, all stilled in the embrace of the white silent snow.

Then she suddenly turned, and met the anxious blue eyes that were intently watching her. Jack's face, manlier by many lines and much additional whisker, seemed to Thea so true, so strong. She looked almost pitifully at him, laying her little gloved hand upon his. He said nothing, but clasped it; and thus they journeyed home, Thea feeling a blessed calm, as if she had laid down her life burdens and had given her weary self into that tight, warm grasp—at least for a space.

At the side-door of Elfield Cottage, which faced the yard—into which Dr. Biron drove somewhat triumphantly, as men convey a prize—Mrs. Biron awaited them, the maids peeping over her shoulder; and as Thea laid her head on the dear shoulder with a suppressed sob, Tyler and the

groom appeared from the outhouses to "help with the luggage," one and all anxious to get a glimpse of the young mistress who had been torn from them by the "grand folk in Lunnon."

Naturally, reports regarding Althea had filtered through the village; naturally, the reports hinted at some wonderful proceedings in the present, some extraordinary glory in the future. It was only in the very bosom of her home, in that dear warm little parlour—where the glowing fire, the basking plants in the window, the ticking clock, seemed working together within the domestic circle as it were—that Thea, being caressingly divested of her wraps as she sate by her mother on the sofa, felt that glory, fame, and the rest might be howling in the cold outside—they had no place here in this atmosphere of peace, love, and rest.

Christmas Day dawned bright and clear. Patches of golden sunlight lay on the snow, bluish gleams glinted on the crystals sparkling under a cloudless sky. The tall old fir-tree in the front garden was drooping under the white masses, morsels of which kept tumbling as a tiny winter breeze stirred the branches. The bells rose and fell, uttering their plaintive tune. was standing at the window, dressed for church, looking yearningly at the calm winter scene, listening sadly to the chatter of the old cockatoo, the pert remarks of the parrot, and the contented cooing of the doves in the passage. She could hear her mother's voice in the kitchen, giving final orders to the maids, and Dr. Biron whistling in the surgery. Then there was a click, the garden-gate opened, and Jack came in, ruddy, smiling, waving his hand to her as he stepped briskly along the path Tyler had swept clear from snow. sighed with sharp, bitter regret, as one gazing at aught once dearly loved and prized, to which he has no claim, to which perhaps he is an utter stranger. "I love the dear fellow so much," she thought, 20 VOL. I.

"that I would give anything, sacrifice anything, if I had never loved him at all."

But Jack felt no suspicion of this apparently contradictory reflection. It was his rôle to feel, rather than to dissect and analyze his feelings. He saw nothing in the graceful figure dressed in velvet and brown furs but the form of the girl he loved. He noticed nothing but that her delicate pale face lay like some early summer rose against the background of her velvet hat; that the long feather curled caressingly around her slender throat; that her eyes softened as they welcomed him with one of the old "speaking looks" peculiar to Althea.

"It seems too good to be true," he said, as he unblushingly kissed her and almost crushed her little hands in his. "Dear Thea, you look so tired out."

"I am," she said wearily. "Now that I am home, I feel tired of—everything."

"Not of us, not of me, Thea?"

She smiled languidly. "I shall wake up presently and be my old self, Jack, and worry you and bother you just as I used to."

"Ah!" He drew a deep breath and seemed to stretch his big frame as he walked a step or two. That "ah" was significant. It meant long months of patient waiting; work, distasteful, got through; disgust, despair, and their attendant temptations strangled at birth; alternate hope and fear; present content, relief, satisfaction. Thea had parted from a boy, but had returned to meet a man.

"You will let me go to church with you? Dr. Biron will not object."

The doctor's step was heard in the passage.

"If it is any pleasure to you.—Papa, Jack has a fancy to sit in our pew this morning."

The doctor, who was beaming with good temper, hesitated a moment. "Of course, if you wish it, Bob."

"I do," said Thea, suddenly. "Jack,

they are tolling in; we had better start." She handed him her Prayer-Book, and without further ado walked out.

The peal of bells had given place to the "tolling in "—slow, repeated strokes which warned the villagers they had better hurry, or they would come clattering in to disturb Mr. Brown's solemn utterances.

"When the wicked man-" A fter the quavering organ had finished the "voluntary," Thea found herself facing the congregation, listening to those well-known words uttered by the clergyman's familiar voice. Jack was on one side, her mother on the other. Dr. Biron stood at the end of the pew, his big arm resting on the ledge, as he audibly trolled out the responses, reading from a massive morocco Prayer-The cheery little Book open on the desk. sexton always found and marked the doctor's places, after he had duly visited the reading-desk, pulpit, and the big square pew with the red curtains belonging to the Hall.

The "Hall people" made a point of

coming late. The carriage-wheels could generally be heard when Mr. Brown stood up in his place, solemnly declaiming the Absolution to his kneeling fellow-sinners. This Christmas morn was no exception. As the rolling murmur of the Lord's Prayer echoed through the little sunlit, whitewashed, holly-decorated church, Sir Robert, leaning on my lady's arm, walked feebly up the aisle and was shut into his high, softly cushioned and hassocked pew.

"I say, he's a-looking at Miss Biron," surreptitiously whispered one of the elder schoolgirls in the white mob-caps and aprons, who sang in the organ-gallery, to another demure young sinner, behind her Prayer-Book. This gallery was opposite the Communion-table—towards which most of the congregation, by the arrangement of the pews, turned their backs—and was adorned by a hatchment of the Royal Arms, and a legend in gilt letters of a bequest of bread to widows, which bread was ostenta-

tiously exhibited in the porch before distribution on Sunday mornings. The girls' fresh faces, framed by the white caps, were pleasant objects for the eyes of the congregation to rest upon, while dreamily listening to Mr. Brown's lengthy disputations. girls themselves were a little spoilt by feeling themselves somebodies in the Therefore they took latitude, and church. many whispered remarks fluttered along that front row of comely young creatures. This morning they were exhibited by the presence of those shining red berries and green prickly leaves, which so forcibly suggested the festival to follow—the big brown joints of beef, and the black, smoking, fragrant round puddings which would be served to them, by-and-by, on whitecovered tables in the school-room. wonder that Sir Robert, the institutor of the school-children's Christmas dinner, was a very magnet to their eyes. As, indeed, Althea seemed to Sir Robert; for as they stood up during the psalms, the old baronet

deliberately adjusted his spectacles, took a good look across at the doctor's pew, and leaning towards his wife, said in a loud whisper—

"My dear, our little girl" (he always called Thea "our little girl" now) "is there, and looking charming, beautiful. We must take her back to luncheon."

Accordingly, when Althea and her companions lingered in the churchyard (as the doctor considered it etiquette to do, so that he might pay his respects to Sir Robert and assist my lady to her carriage), Sir Robert preferred his request. Of course, on such a day, there should be no question of robbing the family party of any of their members for that grand domestic festival, the Christmas dinner. But a little luncheon and half an hour's chat—

"And the carriage shall bring you back, dear, so that you need not be afraid of the snow," chirped Lady Manners, who was walking in front with the doctor. (Jack and Mrs. Biron were following.)

"I must hear all your news, my dear. You had better come," said Sir Robert, hobbling painfully along with the aid of his gold-headed stick. These few months had changed him also. "It is not only for myself I want to know; I have had a letter from my cousin Clifford."

It was well for Thea that her back was turned to her mother and Jack; first she blushed a fiery crimson, then paled.

- "Yes; he is at Algiers. Doesn't like the place much, by the way. However, he has asked me what you are doing. He naturally supposed that you would be at home at Christmas-time, and that we should hear all about it."
- "He is very good," murmured Althea. "Mother, they want me at luncheon—can I go?"

Jack looked away, towards the churchyard wall. At least, he would not interfere with her. It was rather hard; he had looked forward to a few quiet hours—but then he was to dine with them.

"Do as you think best, dear."

So Althea, with a parting apologetic smile, got into the carriage, and was driven off—once more alive, as it were, with anticipation, relishing life.

"Am I merely to be exhilarated by excitement?" she asked herself, as she chattered away to Sir Robert and my lady at luncheon—gave them sketches of Vogel, of the professor; amused them as she never dreamt it was in her power to amuse.

"My dear, your work has not made you any duller," was Sir Robert's remark, as they adjourned into Lady Manners' boudoir. "Do you think so, my love?"

"I think the good child looks wonderfully well," said the old lady kindly, patting her arm. "The good child" did not sink in her estimation from the fact that the dogs remembered her. "Now, Carlo never does that to any one," she remarked, quite pleased, as the little King Charles settled himself upon Thea's lap when she took a low chair close to the hearth. "Certainly

you have a velvet gown, and Carlo prefers that side of the fire because the light doesn't shine in his eyes; still, if the dear thing didn't like you, nothing would induce him to lie in your lap. Would it, Sir Robert?"

"My dear, you know more of Carlo's habits than I do," said Sir Robert. "But may I trouble your ladyship to find my cousin Clifford's letter?" (Sir Robert always addressed Lady Manners ceremoniously as "your ladyship" when he made any special request.) "You see, I am getting old and feeble, Miss Biron. I have to appeal to the kindness and indulgence of others to do for me what I should prefer to do myself. I very much dislike troubling Lady Manners with such trifles."

"My dear, you are well aware that it is a pleasure, and not a trouble," said Lady Manners, in the raised voice whose adoption by those about him proved that Sir Robert was growing deaf. Then the kind old lady went through the unlocking of her husband's secretaire, and the sorting of various packets to find the said letter, Sir Robert trying to be patient while she ferreted for the "large, thin, closely written sheet" he described.

At last it was found and handed to the old gentleman. "Read it, my dear," he said, giving it to Althea with his white, withered, trembling hand.

Once more her eyes met Clifford's handwriting, as she cautiously unfolded the flimsy sheet; once more she felt that strange thrill, half dread, half longing, with which the subject of Clifford, or whatever appertained to it, inspired her.

"There is nothing in the first page," said the old man, as she rapidly glanced over a description of Clifford's life in Algiers, seeing the words "glaring sunshine," "monotony," "mountains basking in the heat," "flat roofs," "dazzling minarets," "few English, and those appallingly uninteresting," and gathering therefrom a

hazy impression that the writer did not "particularly care for" his present location.

"About the middle of the second page," said Sir Robert.

There, surely enough, Althea saw her own name. "How is Miss Biron?" wrote Clifford, abruptly closing his description and dashing into the subject. "This will be cold Christmas-time—coal, flannel, and plum-pudding time at Elfield—and she will naturally be in the 'bosom of her family.' You and my lady will see her. Find out how she likes 'The Retreat,' how she gets on with Miss Helme, how Vogel's lessons agree with her. You see I feel myself in some sort a co-trustee with you and Lord Belmont, and cannot forget the responsibility."

This was all. After a casual allusion to the Belmont family, who were spending the winter months at Torquay, the letter closed.

"You see, my dear, my cousin Clifford's serious way of putting it made me a little

anxious about you," began Sir Robert, with a nervous, inquiring expression in those large blue eyes, where the white rim of old age was riveting its ominous circle. "It seems strange that so young a man as John should feel so earnestly. I must confess it startled me a little, because it seemed almost a reproach. I thought your visit to London, your studies, were merely pleasures, necessaries to make you happier. But Mr. Clifford, you see, by using those very serious words 'trustee' and 'responsibility,' has disturbed my impression. I hardly know what he means. Tell me, my dear, what you are doing, what it is all about."

Thea laughed. She had been tenderly folding and caressingly holding Clifford's letter while Sir Robert was speaking; now she handed it back. "You may tell Mr. Clifford I am quite content," she said, and no one, looking at her glistening eyes, at the tender bloom on her delicate cheeks, at the royal smile of her pouting mouth, could have doubted the fact. "Tell him

that Miss Helme is kindness itself; that Herr Vogel is a capital master; that the scores he kindly chose for me are perfect; that I luxuriate in my work." Althea was in the broad sunlight, which gilded all.

"You quite relieve me, my dear. I can assure you I have been almost worried. You see, I cannot forget that I was the first to encourage you in the idea of a public life. And my world—the world of half a century ago—was not in the least like the world of to-day. There are so many more people; everything has altered; I am, so to say, quite at sea. And about this engagement of yours, my dear (you will forgive me for speaking on so delicate a topic, but my steward and friend Manners is, as all well know, a kinsman of mine). Does the arrangement continue? Is there any definite time fixed for your marriage?"

It was as if you had dropped a piece of ice into the heart of some luscious rose expanding under the hot sun. Thea shrank, the colour faded from her cheeks, her shining eyes dulled.

"Of course my engagement continues, Sir Robert," she said; "of course I shall fulfil it—if Jack's father wishes me to," she added bitterly, "not otherwise."

"My dear, who could doubt his pleasure, his delight?" Sir Robert assured her, somewhat uneasily, for her change of manner troubled him. Had he offended her? and how, when? "There is no family who would not welcome your introduction with satisfaction, ay, and with pride."

"My dear, you must not be vague; you must not let Miss Biron misunderstand you," chimed in Lady Manners, in her raised, shrilly voice. She was anxious to keep "the child" in her place; she had seen the evil of fostering false ideas in the young of the lower and middle classes. "By the word 'family' Sir Robert means, of course, that no respectable people of your own standing would

not welcome an alliance." Lady Manners tugged at her memory for suitable expressions. "You must not understand his use of the word 'family' in its actual sense. You are sensible, my dear "-she lowered her voice—"so I can speak freely. naturally feel that when you are a professional, our steward, Mr. Manners, might make objection to your marriage with his son. I can assure you he is far too He knows that, although he sensible. bears our name, he is the most distant relation, and very dependent—I may say, quite dependent. Sir Robert has merely to say the word, and he will raise no difficulties."

"You misunderstand me, Lady Manners," said Thea, calmly, though there was a threatening gleam in her eyes. "Carlo," with keen instinct, yelped and retreated to the rug, from whence he looked distrustfully at his late resting-place.

"Hey?" cried Sir Robert, sharply. He saw something was wrong. "What are you talking about?"

"I was discussing our young friend's matrimonial affairs, my dear," said his wife, close to his ear.

"Best leave the young people alone, eh, my dear?"

Thea smiled in response. But she was strangely annoyed, unhinged, and, glancing at the clock on the mantel-shelf, said she "really ought to go."

Sir Robert shook his head at the glowing logs on the hearth. "My lady has what the young people would call 'put her foot in it,'" he mused.—"Do as you like, my dear, do as you like," he said. "It is quite natural that on this day, of all days, you should want to be at home. When do you go back to town? To-morrow? Then we shall not see you again. Now, remember this, my dear. I am an old man, you know (one foot in the grave, as they say, and quite ready to go when I am called), but while there is a live pulse in my body, remember that I am your faithful servant. No matter what you ask me, what you tell

me, I will help you. My dear Miss Biron, promise me you will remember this."

He held out his white, trembling hands, and the gentle, appealing expression of the fine old face brought Thea kneeling near his elbow.

"Dear Sir Robert, you are too kind to me. I shall never forget all you have done for me."

"It is not what I have done, but what I will do, that I want you to recollect, my dear."

There was some misgiving in the old man's mind of possible harm to this delicate young creature, towards which he might have lent a helping hand; and he felt much the same as if he had placed the life of some tender fawn in the park in jeopardy, without intending it. What the possible harm might be he could not tell; but his purely good, simple nature felt aware of it in some mysterious, vague way.

Lady Manners was scarcely pleased to see the tears glisten in his eyes. "He is

getting a little childish, my dear," she said in a low tone to Thea; adding loudly, "Miss Biron will soon come back, my dear. You need not look as if you were never going to see her again."

Sir Robert pressed his arms upon his chair-elbows and rose heavily to his feet. "Wherever you go, and whatever you do, my dear, may God bless you!" he said.

Althea stooped and kissed his hand, and taking a subdued leave of Lady Manners (who, kindly though she was, felt a little angry with the girl, she hardly knew why), was soon drawing a long breath of relief as she sped along the broad drive swept clear of snow.

How cool and refreshing was the chill air to her hot brow! How placid the unbroken fields of snow reddening in the evening winter sunlight! Pausing in the lane, where the trees stood out, each motionless twig defined against the clear sky, she looked at the neighbouring farm and outbuildings, still under a thick white

pall. No sound was to be heard; look where you might, all was still.

How like death! Will, feeling, action, paralyzed. She, living, breathing, feeling, found more pain than pleasure in life. Young as she was, she had had to fight against disgust, dissatisfaction, dread, disappointment. Yet, when face to face with emblemized death, she clung in thought to life with a wild passion, and her heart said, "Be life what it may, I belong to life."

It is well when the young—the young who have to fight the fight, inch by inch, breath by breath—are brought face to face with the terrible truths, the opposing forces: life, death; action, passivity; hope, despair; and when they realize the great duality. If not on one side, they are on the other, and whichever it may be, they must take it for what it is worth, accept it, imperfections and all, and bear with all to the bitter end.

"Will my life be like this?" she asked

herself, with that habit of young minds when their active impulses keep them so entirely occupied that self is like a big sun, shining upon everything around so that the lesser stars—others—cease to be perceived. "Shall I walk through a cold, lifeless world, alone? Will the people all seem unreal always—occupied with trivial things, with seemingly no object in life except to get through their time, and to impress their fellow-creatures with their own importance?" \mathbf{She} stood for a moment and looked back. A gleam of sunshine reddened the warm old pile, a column of smoke rose steadily from a chimney-stack; between the black giant skeletons of the trees she could see the window of the cosy room she had just left. "If all people were like Sir Robert and Mr. Clifford, life would be different," she mused; then, turning, she found herself face to face with-Jack.

"Jack!"

She started back. His footsteps on the

snow had been noiseless. He was beaming, too joyful to heed her cool reception of him, to notice the troubled look upon her pale face; and as he took her hand and placed it on his arm, he gave it a rapturous squeeze. "I hardly thought you would come so soon, Thea. It is good of you, darling! I meant to loiter about and watch for you, and just as I turned the corner, there you were! Didn't my heart give a leap! But I deserved it—didn't I?—for my good behaviour."

"Good behaviour?" Thea was only languidly interested. Lady Manners' "interference" made Jack unpalatable, just then.

"Yes. I think I was most forbearing this morning in the churchyard, when they carried you off. I felt quite proud of myself. They couldn't have told what I felt. I actually managed to smile, at all events till you were out of sight."

"I don't suppose they took the trouble to notice you, Jack."

- "I dare say not." Jack was determined to enjoy the remainder of his Christmas Day, so his good-humour was imperturbable. "Poor dear! they have been boring her to death," he resolutely determined. "Thea, darling, let us make a jolly day of it," he said, looking down upon her grave face with a broad, genial smile. "I will just do exactly what you like. I am ready to stand on my head if you wish it. Only let us be happy together; let us have a Christmas Day to remember."
- "Don't—you hurt my wrist." She frowned slightly, as he pulled her hand through his arm. "And as for saying 'let us be happy,' I am not one of those people who can be happy to order. I will pretend to, if you like."
- "Those people have been annoying you, Thea."
- "Not more than most people usually do."
 His kind face, its abrupt plainness
 beautified by love, grew grave. "May I
 speak to you, darling?" he began, half

eagerly, half timidly. "You don't know how anxious I have been about you all this time. You must find me changed, Thea; you must see that I am no longer the boy you left. Dear love! it is what I have suffered about you that has made me a man. Not only the pain of your being away, of having to live in a place which seemed so empty, when you were no longer in it, that it was as if every one were dead (for to me Elfield meant you; work was for you, pleasure came from you, and you only); but not to know what you were enduring, not to be able to console you as I have done all these years, not to be in your confidence—to be shut out, shut away. Thea, I do not complain of my suffering, for it has done me good—it has strengthened me; but it was very bad! Perhaps you think my joy, my feeling of happiness to-day, extravagant. It is the relief from suspense as much as being with you once more." He drew a long breath.

Thea looked curiously at him, as he

raised his hat to let the chill air cool his hot head. "What suspense?" she asked.

- "Thea, dear, your letters were not confidential. There was literally nothing in them. 'You had been at work—you were tired.'"
 - "Well, that was true enough."
- "But do you think I did not know there was something more, much more? I am not clever—you know what a stupid, awkward fellow I am—but my love for you seems to make everything concerning you so plain that I can read your very looks. Thea, you were not happy!"
- "Oh yes, I was, to a certain extent—as happy as I can be, I expect."
- "Thea! I never saw any one who could be so gloriously, splendidly happy, as I have seen you. You would have inspired the most miserable wretch with the belief that happiness was possible. To look at your bright face would have been medicine for the dullest, the most melancholy. You not capable of happiness? I

know better than that! You were made for it, intended for it! Oh, Thea, let me speak. Don't interrupt; don't be angry. You expected to find perfect joy in this 'artistic career.' Have you found anything like it? And the worst has to come—the publicity, the envy and jealousy, the enmity of the friends of your rivals. If you are not happy now, left alone to do as you please with your art, whenever you have sung having met with success, how can you dream of being happy when you are being abused and contradicted and sneered at? Thea, turn back; stop, before it is too late."

She suddenly snatched her hand from his arm. "Jack, you are talking wildly. I don't understand you."

He stood apart. Those two figures, how calmly they stood upon the cold snow, but how raging was the passion within them! "There is no peace anywhere," thought Thea, almost angrily. "I will not lose my temper, and once for all, I will speak,"

thought Jack, clenching his fingers and swallowing that troublesome lump in his throat.

"I mean, darling, that you would be happier if you gave up this idea, and would settle down and be worked for, advised, shielded from harm and trouble. I have strong arms and a hard will, Thea. Even my father says I am the best worker he has seen. I could make my way anywhere. You should never know a care, if you would only fulfil your promise and let me take you and care for you."

"I hope I shall never break any promise that I have made," said Thea; "but I did not mention any time, and the time is certainly not now."

"Thea, the time to be happy is when we are young and strong, and capable of it," he said, snatching her hands and holding them close (at least she had acknowledged that she was bound to him!). "You don't know how happy I would make you."

She smiled, not a pleasant smile. "You talk just like lovers in the romances, Jack," she said. "First act, courting. Theme, 'trust yourself to your adoring lover, beautiful angel,' etc. Second act, marriage. The young wife—poor little silly! has believed that the man she has married is all that he professed to be, and makes a god of him. Act the third, tables turned; wife courts, husband is cool. (Sick of her, of course, just as all people in their senses knew he would be.) Act fourth, he runs away with somebody else, and she comes to a bad end-dies in the workhouse, or, more romantically, on the doorstep of some house, frozen to death, clasping twins to her bosom."

- "I have often felt inclined to curse books," cried Jack, "but never more than now. All those unpractical ideas of yours, Thea, come from books."
- "As it happens, this story was told in a series of pictures—oil paintings."
 - "Well, it is just the same. I believe

what you call 'art' is at the bottom of all the mischief in the world. Thea, I am better off; my books are simpler, truer. Here is one." He drew a small morocco case from his breast pocket, and touching a spring, the lid flew open, and Althea saw a battered little locket, her own gift to him, lying on a satin cushion. whole story lies open to me when I look at that locket, Thea-not only the day you gave it me, the day I lost it, the day it was found and restored to me, but a host of other days. It is one of my books. When I look at it, it brings home hard lessons; it shows me my mistakes, my errors, my follies."

- "You are not complimentary," said Thea, beginning to walk along the lane towards the village. "You evidently class me as one of your follies."
- "Others might say so, but I do not," cried Jack. "Just for the reason that my books are the books of Nature, not art. I learn by my own experience, not by what

is told me in print. If I had read romances, like you, I might have given you up long ago, in despair. I should have formed a false estimate of your talents and gifts, and have felt myself hopelessly your inferior. Books place these — talent and beauty and all those things-first. But Nature. that part of creation fresh from the hand of God, teaches me that there is something beyond those—that faith, constancy, endurance, patience, are the true glories of poor human beings. Therefore, Thea, I do not feel myself your inferior, and each battle I have with myself, each time I conquer, literally 'by the sweat of my brow,' I know I am nearer to God and Thea, darling, never think that to you. I underrate you; never think that any one can love you, value you, better than I do. Only I respect myself—and I am proud to say it; I should not be a real man if I could not—and I know myself worthy to be your husband. Did I not, you would never see me again."

He had touched the right chord in that delicately intricate machine, Thea's nature. Though she walked silently on, looking straight before her, she admired Jack for his right feeling, faithfulness, and courage. If only he could think as she thought! If only he could understand art and artists!

"Don't forget you are talking to a 'mountebank,' Jack." She suddenly flashed her eyes at him. He should not know how she felt—how she could have thrown herself into his arms, and saying, "You are better than I am," have told him everything—everything. What?

"Sneering does not become you, Thea." He spoke coldly, hurt that his warm appeal had met with no response. If a short stay in London had spoilt Thea thus, what would she be a year, two years hence, when she had tasted the sweets of public applause, drunk the intoxicating draught of men's flattery? He ground his teeth in anguish as he pictured her surrounded by

those "false devils," with their specious smiles and smooth words, as he imagined "men in society."

"Thea," he cried suddenly, his face aflame with honest rage, planting himself before her, "you are being ruined. will speak. I can see the precipice before you, though you are blind to it through innocence or ignorance. After this, it will be obstinacy. How can you know what men are—the men you will be thrown among? You have only known good old Sir Robert, quiet Mr. Brown, your own father, mine, and a few others. You don't know how utterly vile, abandoned, the so-called 'gentlemen' are-those who go behind the scenes, and hang about actresses and women leading public lives-men like that Mr. Clifford."

"Stop! How dare you?" Thea was trembling, her large eyes like lamps in her pale face. "Let me pass! Leave me, sir!"

"No." He caught her hand.

"Keep me by violence, then! It will

be of a piece with your insulting my benefactor, my best friend."

"That fellow your benefactor, your best friend! A man whom to be seen with damns a woman, does for her good name."

"If Lord Belmont were to hear you, he would give you a horse-whipping, and serve you right." She bit her lip and stamped her foot, struggling to get her hand free from his vicelike clasp.

"Lord Belmont! No one knows his nephew's reputation better than he does."

"Which explains the fact that he has chosen him as husband for his only daughter, I suppose."

Jack started. Thea gave one tug, wrenched her hand free, and walked rapidly towards the end of the lane. In a bound he was after her.

"Forgive me!" he said pleadingly. "I was wrong; I acknowledge it. How could I know?"

"How could you know?" Thea faced him indignantly. "You ought to be you. I.

ashamed of yourself." At that moment she felt as if she hated him, herself, Clifford, Lady Maud, every one.

But he was softened by a great relief—he hardly knew how great till the afflicting dread was suddenly and strangely removed. Doubt that Clifford's supposed engagement to his cousin was merely a rumour was impossible; Thea not only well knew, but believed in it as a fact.

- "You must make allowances for my jealousy, Thea."
- "I would not confess to such a mean feeling just after I had been praising myself up."

She paused. Suddenly sweet sounds rose into the still winter air, coming from the ivy-covered school-house, whose windows reflected the reddening sky in their hundreds of tiny glinting panes. Young, fervent voices, chanting in parts. . . .

"We thank Thee, Lord, for this our food----"

The chords rose, fell, and died away. But

the simple pathos seemed to rest upon the snowy scene like some mysterious blessing. A little redbreast had been hopping about the wheelright's shed at the corner of the lane, where the saw hung idly near to the half-finished cart-wheel that leant up against a trestle among heaps of shavings; now he broke into a flood of plaintive notes and trills, then flew away towards the school, as if in answer to a summons. The village was before them, wrapt in soft white, silent under the glowing Christmas sunset. Thea melted. Deep down in her heart was a bitter consciousness that she was a traitor to them all; that while in the familiar home-scene, she was not of it; that while with those who loved her, she no longer belonged to them.

"Let us go home," she said, with a half sob. She put her hand through Jack's arm, and he felt himself forgiven. But where was the joyousness, the Christmas cheeriness he had meant to gild his day with? He was downcast, disappointed with himself even more than with her.

"Bless my soul, you two look as if you had come from a funeral!" As they passed into the cottage by the back door, there stood Dr. Biron before the dresser in front of the holly-decorated kitchen windows, his coat off, shirt-sleeves turned up, his jolly face red, shining, and beaming with content as he concocted a huge bowl of punch. His world always went round the right way, without the hitches and stoppages of perplexing doubts and unwelcome emotions. To-day was Christmas Day. What on earth did people pull long faces for? Of all people those two, who had everything they wanted! "Come, come," he said, "we have all got to be jolly to-day, you know. I have been round to your father, Jack, but he is going to dine at the Hall."

The kitchen fire roared, the red flames leaping and dancing among the black saucepans. The huge joint was slowly turning, the cook was anxiously inspecting its progress, while another brisk maid was

arranging rows of round white mince-pies which were going into the oven.

"Taste it," said the doctor proudly, ladling the punch into wine-glasses, "and if you two don't say it's one of the best moments in your lives, don't come to me for a character, that's all."

Elfield Cottage so evidently meant Christmas that it was impossible not to be infected with the prevailing spirit. Wherever they looked, bright hollyberries seemed to wink at them from among the shining prickly leaves. The very dogs went about wagging their tails and greeting every one they met, elated by some internal conviction that there would be unlimited diet administered on this occasion, of a superior sort. This latter was determined by their sniffs as they stood at the kitchen door, considering it better policy to keep out of that little heaven for the present. Their experiences assured them that odours on so large a scale must end in. something tangible. So, after peeping in,

reaching their heads cautiously round the corner, they departed along the passage, tails in the air, contentedly laid themselves down in cosy corners in the parlour, yawned with pleasurable anticipation, and composed themselves to rest their digestive powers by dosing, merely pricking up their ears and opening a watchful eye when any one came in or out, lest the great banquet should prematurely commence without their Even the cockatoo devoted attendance. seemed to have visions which excited him. for he went up and down his perch incessantly, raising his yellow crest, and inviting all indiscriminately to "scratch his poll."

At last the lamps were lighted, and the four sat down to their dinner. The Yule log crackled on the hearth. The doctor carved away, beamed upon the three, and all his funniest anecdotes seemed to come to the surface, and were told with such a relish that even Mrs. Biron, sitting opposite in placid content because her darling was

with her, was amused, and Thea, though she interrupted whenever some slight variation crept in ("Now, papa, that wasn't there last time, you know"), laughed heartily. Jack tried to enjoy himself, to persuade himself his was the fulness of delight; but underlying all was the conviction that not only was to-day a failure, but his life. For what was his life—he thought, when, dessert upon the table, they drank each other's healths in the old port Dr. Biron had had over (before it had undergone "spoiling" for the English market, as he assured every one), and had "laid down" himself, thirty years ago, for special consumption on special occasions. What was Jack's life? He confessed to himself it was expressed, understood, related, as it were, in the one name, Althea.

"I cannot, will not lose her," he thought, when they stood on the landing-place next day as the steamer came in sight, and, as he crushed her hands in his, they looked into each other's eyes. Bystanders, watch-

ing, would have read despair in each young face, and would have felt themselves witnessing a lifelong separation—would have heard a "last word" in his passionate "God bless you!" as he crowded his hat down over his eyes, and almost stumbled along the gangway. As the steamer slowly receded, the sound of the runnels of the gangway sharply hauled back on the pier, sounded cruelly in his ears, almost as the rattle of falling earth upon the coffin of a loved one sounds to the bereaved. He could not bear to look back, and Althea stood by Dr. Biron on the deck, and waved her handkerchief unseen by him. He sullenly turned away from the rapid, restless river, and walked steadily back to his duties through the snow-bound country, which now seemed to him as a huge churchyard, where all hope, love, happiness, lay withered and dead.

While Thea, after her first concern at his evident grief had passed, revived—feeling strangely content that her Christmas visit

home was well over. "I am more myself when I am at work," she considered, attributing her rise of spirits after Miss Helme's warm welcome (the kind little lady had missed her charge sadly, and told her so), and her throb of delight when she was once more "in her own dear room," to her love for her work.

This she certainly proved, as winter passed and spring was imminent, if deferred. Some new freshness, some additional spur, seemed to have sent her mind flying through her work. Vogel thought she learnt too rapidly to recollect; but he was forced, after many tests, to rescind his "You are a wonderful girl," he opinion. was betrayed into saying, one day when his pupil astonished him. Then he talked warmly of her "coming out." He considered her ready. He had his own opinions as to the when and how-"but these must be discussed with our patron, Lord Bel-He cannot be absent from town mont. much longer," he said.

Althea felt that this day should be the day of days to her. She knew she ought to be elated, literally to overflow with joyful hopes. Why, probation was over! Realization was actually within her grasp. Vogel had told her that so short a student life was unparalleled in artistic annals. "But what can we do?" he added. "You have learnt in six months what people can usually scarcely manage to get through in six years."

Even this—even the growing consciousness of power, brought but slight satisfaction. If anything, Thea felt sorry that the strain, the striving to conquer, was removed. Her restlessness grew as the days went on. She was never still. When in her "dear room," as she called it, she felt a longing to be out in the free air; when wandering about the garden or the great park, her loneliness oppressed her, a vague yearning made her heart ache, and she soon sought home again.

At first Miss Helme tried to accompany

her in her wanderings. Not only did this chafe and annoy Althea, but the little spinster, who did not grow stronger as she grew older, felt the effort too much for her. She wrestled considerably with her conscience before she allowed her charge such an alarming amount of freedom, but what was she to do? She could not keep up with the "dear, active girl;" and Althea's face when her guardian timidly suggested the attendance of Martha ("who would walk a few yards behind you, of course, dear—no one knows her place better than Martha") was a study.

"I would rather stop indoors for good," she said decidedly. So Miss Helme "gave in."

Pale spring dawned at last. Faint sunshine caressed the tiny peeping buds; they crept out of their lairs in the harsh wood, so timidly—it seemed to Thea—that if she looked at them they would disappear. A gleam of green hovered about the great trees in the park, a promise rather than a fact.

Althea wandered about the grassy slopes that first balmy morning in a rapture. "Summer is coming," was her one ecstatic thought. She had not known her whole being leap up to welcome the warm beautiful season like this before. The very word "summer" seemed to her now pregnant with rich joy, and her eyes sought each sign of spring hungrily—dwelt passionately upon the gleaming river, sought each sprouting frond among the dead bracken, and examined it with growing content.

"Somehow, I know I shall be happy," she said suddenly, out loud. She was alone, leaning against a rugged trunk where tiny three-cornered ivy leaves were cautiously beginning to lift up their heads.

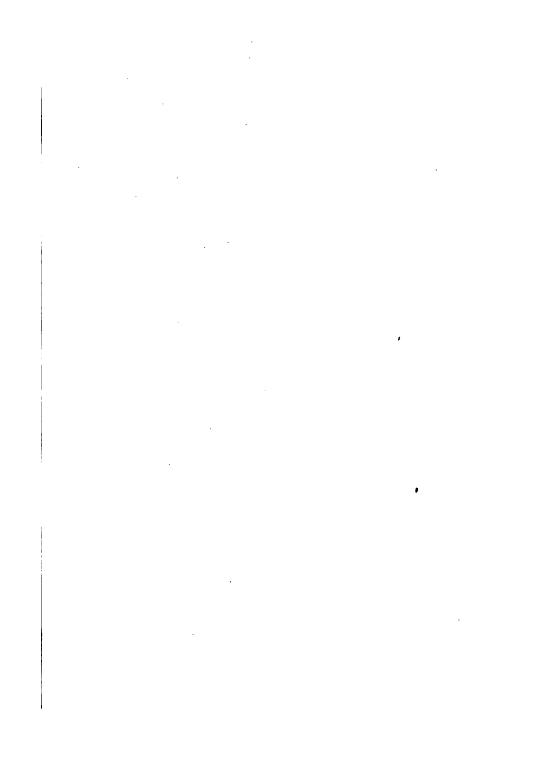
"Why not?"

She started, scared. Her heart seemed stilled in her breast. She turned, like an animal hunted down faces death. Something, some one, stood there, but her terror-stricken eyes were powerless to recognize. Her hands were taken and

gently clasped; then the banished blood rushed back into its channels, and she gasped—
"Oh! Mr. Clifford!"

END OF VOL. I.

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